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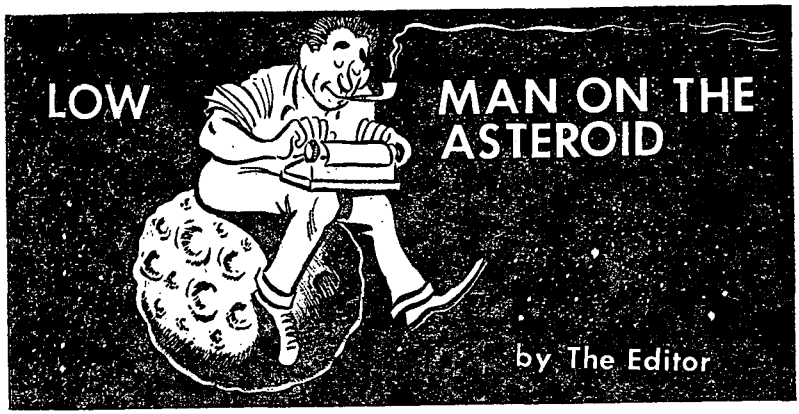

As most of you know, we have a sister mag (or maybe it's a brother) called *Amazing Stories*. At any rate, she/he's much older than *Fantastic*, having been born in 1926. A lot has happened since then, but come boom or depression, *Amazing* has been hitting the stands year in and year out with the best science-fiction ever published. And over most of these same years we've been getting letters: "Where can I get a February, 1939, *Amazing Stories?* There was a story in it entitled 'Wanted—Seven Fearless Engineers.' I want to read it again." Or: "In the June, 1927, issue of *Amazing*, you ran a story by Ellis Parker Butler called, 'Solander's Radio Tomb.' It was funnier than Butler's 'Pigs Is Pigs.' Where can I get a copy?" Also: "Ray Cummings had a story in the July, 1942, issue called 'The World Beyond.' It was a corker and I want my young son to read it. Where can I get a copy?"

And each time we had to say, "Sorry, that issue is out of print. You might browse through a secondhand magazine store, but your chances of finding the issue are pretty slim."

So the idea of putting out a 30th Anniversary Issue of *Amazing Stories* evolved naturally and upon a solid foundation. Namely, an unquestioned desire of a lot of people to read, again, those great classics; to find out if they are as fine reading as time and nostalgia make them appear in memory.

You may rest assured that they are, because in the process of selecting for the Anniversary Issue, we began reading our bound file copy dated 1926 and didn't stop until we were well

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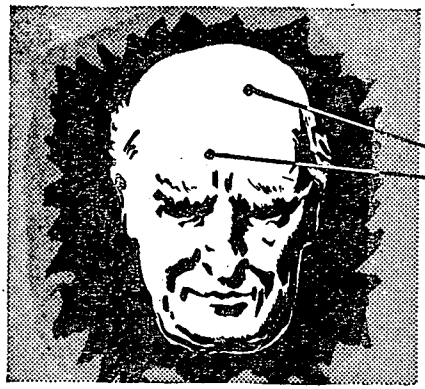

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CONCEPTION: ZERO

By GERALD VANCE

There have been many incredible laws in the history of Mankind; stupid laws, ridiculous laws, grim and brutal laws. But how fares a world in which the law states: You shall not love? Where nature itself is told to stand still?

JOHNNY BARLOW frowned and said, "Why me? It's a dirty assignment."

The Chief was a typical government service man named Craig and was known as a real stiff-back among the people at the Public Welfare Bureau. He said, "I don't quite understand. The law is the law. You know that world population must be rigidly controlled."

"I know, but I still say it's a dirty assignment. Motherhood is about the strongest yen in all females—human or otherwise."

"I'm sure the lawmakers took that into consideration

Verban had to be put

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in his place. A roundhouse right did it.

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when the rulings were passed."

"What made them think they could make it stick?"

"I think we've made it stick very well," Craig said acidly. And when Johnny Barlow didn't reply, went on. "Tell me. Just how can population be controlled if conception is allowed to take place indiscriminately? You know we have over five billion people on this globe—that we've had to move Indians and Pakistani to the plains and mountains of Canada—that every island in the Pacific is solid with people. Only the polar continents are barren. You know that feeding the world population is a very grave problem. Are you maintaining—?"

"I'm not maintaining anything. I just think it was pretty stupid to run accident-prevention campaigns, find miracle drugs, outlaw war, conquer epidemic-causing diseases and generally increase the life-span only to have to tell women they can't have children because the world's over-populated."

Craig listened with marked disapproval. "It is not ours to question the wisdom of the World Government's lawmakers," he said. "Our job is to enforce the laws as they exist." Craig paused, "And the—ah, the other thing is important, too. Most important."

Johnny got up from his chair. "Okay," he snapped. "It's an assignment."

As he left, Johnny realized he had been trying to get fired. "You fool, you!" he muttered. "You need this job . . ."

On the afternoon of the second day following, Johnny took an elevator to the forty-third floor of an uptown apartment building and rang the bell at the door to 4326. It was opened by a slim, dark-haired, pretty girl who stood for a moment as though tempted to close it again. Johnny smiled.

"I'm Johnny Barlow," he said. "You're Kay Conway? The girl who answered the ad in the *Chronical?*"

She had memorized the ad. It flashed through her mind:

Wanted: Personable girl—20-30 age limit. Work requires neither experience nor college degree. Could entail physical danger but compensation is high . . .

"Yes. I—"

"There were other applicants also," Johnny said.

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"This interview will be only preliminary."

She appeared to find relief in this. "Won't you come in, Mr. Barlow?"

Johnny found a modest, one-room apartment. The chair Kay Conway offered him was worn along the arms. The curtains had seen better days. Kay Conway sat on a bumpy lounge with her legs curled under her. Johnny studied her impersonally. "Miss Conway, why did you apply for this—for the opening we advertised."

The uncertainty she had shown at the door had now vanished. "I might answer your question with another: "Why did you advertise for someone to fill the opening?"

Johnny was not annoyed by her independence of spirit. From his surroundings, he knew this girl needed work. He knew too, of course, that work was very hard to find. What with technological advancements and an overpopulated world, those with jobs were the lucky ones. The majority of the people lived on the skimpy Government Dole and fought as desperately to get off of it as though they were actually facing starvation.

"This will be only a temporary assignment," Johnny said. "Not a permanent position."

"The ad said the pay was high."

"There will be no trouble on that score. Are you single, Miss Conway?"

"Yes. Is that a necessary qualification?"

Johnny saw now that she was far prettier than she had first appeared. She had spirit. It glowed in her eyes; something not too often seen these days. "Not absolutely necessary, except that a husband might complicate things."

She threw Johnny a look of suspicion. This he also liked. "Perhaps you'd better tell me about the opening, Mr. Barlow. Frankly, I wouldn't be interested in anything—"

Johnny took out his PWB card and extended it. Kay Conway looked at it. Her eyes widened. "You're a government agent!"

"Right. And now could I see your identification?"

She got up and brought a wallet from a drawer of the desk and took out the cards one by one. "Unemployment Benefit—Old Age Security—Finger Print Classification—Birth Record—" Johnny thought she drew forth the last one with a touch of re-

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sentment: "Sterilization Record."

He looked closely at this last and noted Kay Conway had been sterilized at the age of twelve. "That's fine, Miss Conway. Now please sit down. I'll tell you about the job."

"Please do."

"You know of course that there are good reasons for the Sterilization Laws."

"I've heard there are good reasons."

"Common sense indicates that the population must be controlled or complete chaos would result."

"Perhaps complete chaos would be a good thing."

"I don't understand you."

"In ancient times, nature had ways of keeping the population in balance."

"But they were unscientific," Johnny said, hating the words he had to speak. He paused before going on. "Miss Conway, perhaps your personal convictions would render you unsuitable for this assignment."

"Have your personal convictions rendered you unsuitable for your work?"

"I don't understand you."

"Your ideas on the subject are the same as mine."

This stopped him for a moment. Then he grinned. "You are a damned smart girl, Miss Conway."

She smiled back. "The name is Kay. Let's get down to it, shall we?"

"All right. You may or may not know that the sterilization laws are being circumvented—that some scientists have figured out the way to counteract sterilization and make women fertile again."

"I've heard about that," Kay said evenly.

"Until recently, the method of counteracting sterilization was a secret of the Government scientists, to be used only upon the legal issue of pregnancy permits."

"And certain *unethical* men have discovered the secret and are using it to their own profit."

Her mocking stress on the word *unethical* did not escape Johnny but he passed it over. "Your assignment would have to do with helping me trap these men."

"You know who they are?"

"Yes, but proving it is another thing. Getting any of their clients to testify against them is impossible—"

"I can understand that."

"So I need a ready-made client—a girl who will contact them, arrange to be treated, and come away with first-hand evidence."

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A slight smile touched Kay's lips. "The treatment probably comes high. I imagine the money will be provided."

"It will."

"And one more thing."

"What is that?"

"A pregnancy permit."

"I don't think that will be necessary," Johnny said.

"I think it would. I have no intention of going to jail for ten years. Once fertilization is proved—"

"We won't have to go that far. Intent to fertilize will be enough in this case."

"But—"

"Pregnancy permits are impossible for even the law enforcement bureaus to get."

"It would seem that with proper justification—"

"The Population Control people look upon their job as a God-given responsibility. Asking for a pregnancy permit outside the quota would be like asking a priest to reveal the secrets of the confessional. We'll do the job without a permit."

"Then I take it you're considering me for the assignment?"

Johnny grinned. "You were hired the minute I walked in the door . . ."

The illicit partnership of Neal Verban and Professor John Delano was an ideal one; ideal for both the accumulation of illegal profits and the service of humanity; that is if helping women break the law could be regarded as a service to mankind.

Professor Delano had not the slightest interest in money. He militantly and sincerely thought he was morally right in what he did. Neal Verban, on the other hand, cared not in the least for morals or laws. His sole interest lay in keeping Professor Delano misinformed as to the cost of the ray equipment and the maintainance thereof.

Delano, who had discovered the ray, hadn't the foggiest notion of the cost of anything. And he had never questioned Verban's figures. First, because Verban had originally furnished the money to build the unit and second, because he trusted Verban implicitly.

Still, the situation irked him. In the privacy of their laboratory this particular day, Professor Delano said, "I do this thing because I think it is right. Legal or not, I do it because I say no man has a right to tell a woman she cannot bear a child."

"And you are justified, Professor," Verban said smoothly. "Your name will be

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remembered in history when those of the tyrants are forgotten."

"Not tyrants," Professor Delano said wearily, "just misguided men. They will live to regret their own acts. Their failures."

"Let us hope so."

"But we also fail. We should be able to serve any woman who comes to us. It must appear that we do what we do for profit. Must we charge such high fees?"

"I'm afraid it is necessary," Neal Verban said with finely simulated regret. "Our operating expense is staggering."

"And even some who can bear the expense—we still turn them away."

"Because we must be practical. We must never forget that we are outlaws in the eyes of the government. They want to stop us. They send spies."

"I suppose so. You know what is best, Neal."

"I have only one ambition," the hypocritical Verban replied, but now with true sincerity. "That you are able to continue your fine work as long as possible."

"And when we are finally caught," Professor Delano said, "We will go to prison or execution with our heads high."

Verban nodded gravely. But speaking inwardly, he said, *You will—I won't.*

Professor Delano glanced through the one-way mirror into the waiting room. "We have a prospective patient." He smiled. "A sweet looking girl. Do you suppose she can afford our service?" His smile turned a trifle bitter and his eyes bleak.

"I'll question her," Verban said.

"Do. And just this once let's be a little more charitable. She looks so unhappy. We can certainly afford a small burst of generosity."

Verban patted the Professor's arm warmly. "I'll see what I can do for her . . ."

Verban greeted the girl and took her into his private office. Beyond range of the mirror, his manner changed, grew cold, almost hostile.

"Name, please."

"Kay Conway."

Verban studied the girl. He had a sixth sense in such matters as these. He awaited its reaction, but no warning came. "What can we do for you, Miss Conway?"

"I—" Johnny Barlow had coached Kay well. She tried to appear both eager, and a trifle frightened. "I—"

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"Perhaps some physician sent you?"

"A physician?"

"Yes. We do specialized neurotherapy work. Many doctors and physicians recommend us to their patients."

"No, I—"

"What seems to be your trouble?" Verban softened a trifle and smiled slightly.

"I—I want to have a baby!" Kay blurted.

Verban froze. "The government gives fertilization treatments upon issuance of pregnancy permits."

"But I haven't got a permit."

"You'll have to leave this office, young woman. We are a legitimate institution!" He had arisen from his chair but had placed himself between Kay and the door so she would have had a hard time obeying his order.

"But—but I heard that you do it without a permit. Please! I want a baby so badly! I—"

"Who told you this?" Verban's tone was properly indignant.

"A woman I know. She—"

"Give me this woman's name and address. She must be turned over to the authorities."

"I can't! She disappeared. I don't know where she is. But I know she was pregnant and she told me—"

"You can at least give me her name."

"Clara Riddington. She—" Kay devoutly hoped she was acting the part of a frightened, scarcely articulate girl.

Verban pondered. "Just a moment."

He went into the next room and consulted a coded card file. Yes, Clara Riddington had been a patient.

In the other room, Kay waited tensely. The name had been furnished by Johnny Barlow. The Public Welfare Bureau had it on file as that of an illegally pregnant woman. However, Clara Riddington had refused to talk and would soon bear her child behind prison bars.

Verban returned. "Let me see your identification."

Kay handed him her wallet. He went through it carefully, then handed it back and sat down. He stared at Kay for some time, giving his sixth sense a last chance to object.

He said, "In certain cases we *do* furnish patients with an added neuro service. But it is very expensive."

"What is the cost?" Kay asked timidly.

"Three thousand dollars."

She gasped convincingly.

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"Three thou—but I haven't that much money!"

"How much do you have?"

"I've saved a little over nine hundred—"

"Not nearly enough," Verban said. He arose as though the interview were at an end.

"Wait, wait—I think perhaps I can raise the money."

"How?"

Kay tried to blush. "There is a man—"

Verban scowled. "Have you told anyone else about your coming here?"

"No, oh no. This man is quite elderly. He—"

"I'm not interested in your personal relations."

"But if I raise the money may I come back?" Kay's voice was pathetically eager.

"Within a reasonable time —yes. But we don't like these affairs strung out interminably."

"How long?"

"If you can raise it within a week, perhaps we can serve you. But I said *perhaps.*"

Kay arose, now joyful. "Oh, I will! I'll be back before the week is out!"

"Very well."

Verban ushered Kay out and stepped immediately to the telephone . . .

Kay Conway left the *Advanced Neurological Institute* with mixed emotions. So far as her relations with Johnny Barlow were concerned, she felt she had fulfilled her obligations well. She had convinced Verban of her sincerity—even to the point where he was allowing her time to raise the money. Her act had evidently been skillfully put on.

She walked swiftly to meet Johnny and as she walked, she gave this last some thought! Had it been completely an act? The thought of possibly being able to have a baby had thrilled her. It had not been at all difficult to appear eager. But it was not possible. Kay smiled ruefully as she caught sight of Johnny leaning casually against a lamp post.

She moved in his direction then stiffened and veered away. There was something in his eyes.

Then words came from between his unmoving lips: "Keep on walking. You're being tailed. Go home. I'll get in touch with you."

She moved on, trying to walk naturally, feeling Johnny's eyes pushing her. As the distance between them widened, she felt a strong urge to see who was following her. While marveling at her own bravery, she stopped

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suddenly as though attracted by a shop window.

Then she turned her eyes far to the right.

There were half a dozen people in sight. One in particular attracted Kay's attention; a tall thin man who seemed entirely too casual in his movements. The rest were quite ordinary people. Two shabbily-dressed housewives.

A short, fat, middle-aged man with the look of a business executive. Two youths with pinched faces. Kay hurried on. She glanced back as she turned the next corner. The tall thin man was moving a little faster than before.

She turned again at the next corner and when she was sure no one followed, she hurried home. She let herself in and closed the door with a sense of relief.

A voice said, "Hello."

Kay whirled. The fat little business executive smiled up at her from the chair with the worn arms.

"You—!"

"That's right. You had the tall skinny guy spotted, didn't you?"

Frightened, Kay groped for words. The fat little man's smile deepened. "I figured you were on the way home so I came straight on and waited."

"How did you get in?"

He shrugged. "Does it matter? I obviously found a way."

"What do you want?"

Kay rallied from the first shock of finding this man sprawled in her chair. After all, she had nothing to fear. She had broken no law.

The man had been regarding her with smirking confidence. "Why did you follow me?" she asked.

"I've been keeping an eye on you for some time."

"By what right?"

He shrugged. "Call it curiosity."

"Get out!"

The man set his fingers together and regarded her over the steeple they formed. "Yes, I've been watching you. Today, for instance, you went to see a couple of crooks who are making a good thing out of illegal ray treatments."

A touch of fear ran through Kay. "I broke no law. In fact I don't know what you're talking about. If you're referring to my visit at the *Advanced Neurological Institute,* I had a perfect right to go there."

"Very dangerous. You could land in jail—for life."

"What business is it of yours, Mr—?"

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"Canfield — Sam Canfield. And I made it my business."

"Are you a—a government agent?"

"In a way, but I think you are wrong about me. I've come as a friend."

Kay had moved warily across the room and now sat tensely on the edge of the lounge. "You could do me a service by leaving, Mr. Canfield. I—"

"Call me Sam. We're going to see more of each other."

"I think not."

"You didn't even ask me what government agency I'm with. You must be itching to find out. Go ahead—ask me."

Kay remained silent. The fat man laughed. He appeared to be enjoying himself. "I'm from *Population Control.*"

Kay turned pale. The dread, shadowy bureau of untouchables who decreed motherhood or barrenness for every woman in the world. The people who sterilized each female before her thirteenth year and allowed fertilization to a heartbreaking few.

"That's a lie! No one from *Population Control* ever calls personally upon—"

He shrugged. "I'm calling personally. I've come to help you. I'm going to see that you get a permit."

Kay's amazement rendered her almost speechless. "Why that's com—completely impossible!"

"Is that what Johnny Barlow told you?" Sam Canfield asked lazily.

"You know Johnny Barlow?"

"I know him. He doesn't know me."

"Then you know he contacted me—"

"Of course. I make it a point to find out such things. He's trying to smash up the Verban-Delano combination. He hired you to pigeon the joint for him and set up his targets."

Kay could hardly believe this strange little man was real. But she was no longer afraid of him and a dozen questions came to her mind. "You aren't in sympathy with his efforts?"

"Sympathy — sympathy — who cares? I do business with Verban but if they nail him I'll find another connection." His smile was oily, maddening to Kay. "You see, Kay, every guy makes a buck for himself any way he can."

She resented his use of her first name. "I don't know what your purpose is, but I

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don't think you're from *Population Control.*"

Sam Canfield took out his wallet and tossed it to her. She opened it. His picture and prints were on a *Population Control* identification card inside. Numbly, Kay handed back the wallet. "But I don't understand. You're obviously a crooked, rotten little man. But the *Population Control Bureau* has always been beyond reproach. Men of unquestioned integrity!"

"Integrity is a comparative term," Sam Canfield said. "The public has a lot of illusions about their bureaus that the bureaus themselves foster very carefully. You see, the people made the mistake of letting 'government by bureau' get a foothold. Once established we never let go. We entrenched ourselves and intermingled and propogated until we couldn't be rooted out. "We—" Canfield stopped. He laughed. "But I didn't come here to give you a civics lesson. I came to help you out. Do you want a pregnancy permit or don't you?"

And Kay was convinced this man was what he claimed because suddenly she wanted to believe. A pregnancy permit! The right to have a baby, to feel its soft helpless warmth close to her heart. The desperate yearning to fulfill the role for which she had been born!

"How can you get me a permit?"

"That isn't the point. I can get it. But the cost is high."

"How much?"

He regarded her slyly. "Let's say three thousand dollars. That's a nice round figure."

She answered his look with one of contempt. "Why don't you come right out and say you know that's Neal Verban's price for an illegal fertilization."

"I know that?"

"Of course you do. You couldn't charge three thousand dollars by pure coincidence."

"I know more than that. I know Johnny Barlow is going to give it to you."

"To give to Verban. I have no money to give to you."

"You'll have three thousand dollars."

"I said it was for Verban."

"I'll take care of him."

"You mean you—?"

"Never mind what I mean." Canfield was hardening now. The oily smile was gone.

"I'd have to know a lot more than you've told me."

"Ask me."

"How would I know the permit you gave me would be

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genuine? How can you insure me against arrest and imprisonment?"

"My word will have to be good enough."

"I wouldn't take your word for it."

He smiled again. "You'll take it."

"You seem very sure of yourself."

"I am. Because I know women. You'd even take a counterfeit permit on the hope you could get away with it. The urge to have a child is basic. They can keep you from having a child, maybe, but they can't make you stop wanting to."

"You're very clever."

"Sure."

"If I agree to your deal—what's the next step?"

"Get the three grand."

"I don't know when Johnny Barlow will give it to me."

"He'll give it to you as soon as he finds out you've set the thing with Verban." Canfield looked at his watch. "I'd better go now. Barlow will probably be along any minute."

"Where can I contact you if and when Johnny Barlow gives me the money?"

"You can't. I'll contact you. Don't worry about it."

"Suppose Johnny doesn't give me the money until later?"

Sam Canfield considered. "Get the money tonight if you can. Tell him you have to pay Verban tomorrow morning. Tell him anything you want to. Just get it."

Canfield started for the door, then stopped and turned. "One more thing."

"What?"

"If you've got any idea of crossing me on this just remember you're the only one that can be hurt. You and Barlow. I'm in the clear and I'll stay there. *I can't be hurt.* Remember that."

Kay's smile was contemptuous. "You mean your Bureau doesn't care if you're a crook?"

"No," Canfield said grimly. "I mean I'll kill both you and Barlow if I have to." His eyes flashed and suddenly Kay knew they were the eyes of a killer . . .

Sam Canfield entered Neal Verban's private office without knocking, sat down beside his desk, and grinned.

Verban eyed the fat little crook sourly. "What do you want?"

"Is that any way to greet an old friend?"

"Friend my eye!"

"Business associate then?"

"The less business I have with you the better."

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"But you haven't got any choice," Canfield said. He was enjoying himself. "Especially when I can cut your throat seven ways any time I feel like it."

"I've met rats in my time—!" Verban muttered.

"A word from me about the real cost of this deal to Delano and I think he'd grab a knife and kill you. Suppose I told him one of your fertility treatments costs you around twenty bucks and you are getting all the traffic will bear. He'd kill you in outraged righteousness."

"It's not to your advantage to tell him," Verban snapped.

"Of course not. It isn't to my advantage to bring the law down on you either."

"You're well-paid to keep your mouth shut."

"Sure, but now I want another payment."

Verban scowled. "What is it this time?"

"That girl who was in today—Kay Conway. I want you to treat her for nothing. I'll take the money."

Verban's face darkened. "You—"

"Now take it easy. I'm doing you a real favor in return. That girl's a pigeon for Johnny Barlow, the *Public Welfare Bureau* dick. He's planting her. If I hadn't come here to tip you off—" Canfield jerked a symbolic finger across his throat.

"A pigeon!" Verban sprang to his feet and began pacing rapidly back and forth. "I suspected it the moment I laid eyes on her!"

"You didn't suspect a damn thing and you know it. See? It pays to keep me posted."

"Well, I guess I do owe you something, but there won't be any treatment. If you can get her money somehow—"

"I'll get her money. And you'll treat her free."

"Have you gone out of your mind?"

"Don't worry about a thing. The girl may be a pigeon, but she'd turn in her own father to get a legitimate pregnancy permit. She'll cross Barlow."

Verban regarded Canfield with a mixture of hostility and awe. "How in the hell do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Get those permits?"

"That secret is worth a lot of money."

Canfield puzzled Verban. He knew of several women for whom Canfield had obtained pregnancy permits at very fancy prices. Counterfeit or genuine, these permits passed the standards and the

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recipients bore their children safely outside prison bars.

Yet Verban knew for a fact the *Population Control Bureau* was above corruption; that honesty, fairness, and impartiality were more than mere catchwords there. He knew that permits were automatically applied for by mothers in behalf of their daughters when the latter reached the required age of fourteen. He also knew that no amount of money nor influence prevailed at the *Bureau*. All permits were come by honestly — except those bootlegged by Canfield.

How did the man do it?

Canfield got up from his chair. "Okay," he said. "It's set."

A wave of helpless resentment swept Verban. Too long he had been in the power of the fat little corruptionist. Vulnerable or not, a person could stand only so much sneering dominance.

"I don't know whether it is or not!" Verban said.

Canfield scowled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm about fed up. I know the consequences of turning you in but I just might do it regardless!"

Canfield moved on the bigger man like a cat. He hit Verban sharply on the side of the neck with a stiff hand. Verban gasped in pain and sank down, cringing. Canfield kneed him expertly in the face—hard enough to stun but not to draw blood. Verban went down. Canfield put one foot on his throat and applied just the right amount of pressure. Verban eyed him in silence and pain.

"Don't ever get any ideas, friend," Canfield said in quiet, sneering contempt. "You're not playing with school kids. You open your mouth too wide and by God I'll close it for you for good. I'll get you before they get me and don't forget it."

He took his foot off Verban's throat and cat-footed out of the office. He moved quietly for so fat and clumsy-looking a man . . .

Johnny Barlow handed Kay Conway three one-thousand-dollar bills. She took them and turned away sharply. Johnny said, "They ask a stiff price."

Kay fingered the money nervously. "Do you expect to get this back from the *Institute* after—?"

"We will if we can."

"Isn't there any way you can get a permit—make this —this operation legal?"

"It's legal," Johnny said

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quietly, "because a government bureau is backing it."

"Yes, legal so long as the act of fertilization isn't accomplished. If it is, I'll be treated as any other criminal female who has broken the population laws."

"But it won't go that far."

"I don't understand it. How government bureaus — all basically interested in the same thing can't work together."

"Few people realize what it's like inside government. They visualize it as a smoothly-operating, perfectly coordinated whole, when it's really a lot of suspicious jealous bureaucrats, each fiercely protecting his own sphere of influence. Each bureau spends most of its time seeing to it no other bureau encroaches on its domain."

"But I'd think the *Population Control Bureau* would be as anxious as you are to stamp out illegal fertilizations."

"They are, but in this case they are just as happy that the duty of stamping them out falls on us."

"Why?"

"Because the law involved is the most unpopular ever put on the books. The public hates it and will break it at every opportunity. So, in the eyes of the public, the *Advanced Neurological Institute* is not a criminal enterprise. Why do you suppose women refuse to testify against them? Why do you suppose I had to arrange this trap?"

"With me as bait," Kay said dully.

Johnny flushed. "It's a business arrangement. I didn't force you into it."

She turned on him suddenly. "You say there's no way of getting a permit."

"Absolutely none."

"But you're wrong—there is."

Hardly had her instinctive honesty forced her to speak than she regretted it. To be allowed the precious blessing of a child of her own! Was any law—any code of honesty—more important than that?

"What do you mean?" Johnny snapped.

She had to say something. Yet she could not bring herself to tell Johnny about Sam Canfield and thus cut off all possibility of getting a permit.

"A man called me last night. He didn't give me his name. He just said he could get me a permit if I wanted it."

"Some kind of a bootleg deal. Somebody trying to

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cheat you out of some money. Whoever it was he probably calls dozens of women. It's an old racket."

"I don't think so. I think he meant what he said."

"How can you believe that? You said the man wouldn't give his name." Johnny paused and studied Kay's face. "Or is there something you aren't telling me?"

"I just feel that the *Population Control Bureau* isn't as sancrosant as you believe."

"That's absurd," Johnny said. "If the man calls again, hang up on him."

"Is that an order?" Kay's smile was mocking.

"Of course not. But it's good advice."

Kay was suddenly sorry. She regarded Johnny fondly. There was something about his serious, boyish face; a harrassed quality in his expression that told of an honest man trying to do a distasteful job because it *was* his job.

"I'm sorry, Johnny. Forget what I said."

She laid a quick hand on his arm. He smiled and said, "Sorry if I sounded like a general."

"Can I make you a cup of coffee?"

"No. I'm pretty tired. I'm heading home to bed." He nodded toward the money. "Be careful with that. You'll probably have to give it to him tomorrow morning."

"Suppose he wants me to go under the ray immediately?"

"He won't I'm sure. From what I've been able to gather, they don't work that way. He'll tell you to come back the next day or the day after. I'll be in touch with you. We'll set up the trap."

He opened the door. Kay said, "Wait." He turned. She was holding forth the money. "Here. You keep this—until later. I won't need it tomorrow."

"How do you know you won't?"

"Because I won't give Verban any money until I go to the office for the ray treatment. I don't trust him."

Johnny studied her intently. Then he took the money and put it back in his wallet. "All right. If you want it that way."

"I do."

"And don't worry about the man who was following you."

"Who do you think he was?" Kay asked innocently.

"Possibly one of Verban's men—keeping you under surveillance. Verban has to be very careful."

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Kay smiled warmly. "Goodnight, Johnny."

Johnny smiled back. Kay was a nice girl. As nice a girl as you could find. Strange how sterilization did something to women. They stayed just as pretty. Their legs were just as nice; their smiles just as inviting. But something was missing . . .

Outside, Johnny looked for a cab, saw none, and started walking slowly down the street. His sober expression reflected the gravity of his thoughts.

He knew of course, that the man following Kay had been Sam Canfield of the *Population Control Bureau.* He knew also that Sam was one of the cleverest scoundrels in government.

Being basically honest, Johnny disliked having had to mislead Kay as to his true purpose. He wanted to trip up Verban and Delano, true enough, but he would offer them immunity from prosecution in return for testifying against Canfield.

Johnny was a little ashamed of what lay behind this: at the grim hostility between the bureaus of the government, bureaus that should have been working in harmony for the public good.

But it had been many years since governmental bureaus had worked together, and now a tragic situation existed whereby the head of the *Public Welfare Bureau* was more interested in proving corruption in the *Population Control Bureau* than working quietly for the general welfare and the public good.

Johnny thought of these things in passing but his mind went primarily to the major question. What possible reason could Sam Canfield have had for contacting Kay Conway? Kay was a nobody until Johnny contacted her and made her a cog in his plan.

Immediately, Sam Canfield had appeared on her trail. How could he possibly have known Johnny had selected her as a pigeon? Was there a leak somewhere in the *Public Welfare Bureau?* It was possible, but Johnny thought not.

But granting this, what had Sam Canfield offered Kay? A pregnancy permit? That was what Johnny suspected. Rumor had it that Canfield's operation lay in that direction. But rumor was vague as to just how crooked money could be made out of pregnancy permits. Yet the shadowy trail led in the di-

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rection of the *Advanced Neurological Institute.*

Was Canfield counterfeiting permits? Again, Johnny doubted it. Faking was a crude and dangerous business. A man of Canfield's intelligence would not touch a business of that kind.

Johnny's shoulders drooped as he moved down the street. It was a cheap hungry world. Maybe the government was right. Maybe there were too many people.

Johnny straightened and hurried in the direction of the *Advanced Neurological Institute* to set up his trap . . .

"I didn't get the money," Kay said. She waited for an outburst from Sam Canfield, certain he would give vent to his disappointment.

But Canfield merely shrugged. "I didn't think he'd give it to you. But we can get it later. Right now we've got an appointment with Verban and Delano."

"An appointment? What for?"

Canfield grinned. He drew an envelope from his pocket. "Here it is." He took an official form from the envelope and handed it to her. "This says you can now have a bawling brat with the blessing of heaven and the Population folks." He leered at her. "Got the man picked?"

A thrill ran through Kay. She reached out and took the permit with a kind of reverence. She did not see Canfield's leer nor did she hear his question. She read the magic words on the permit and realized the potency of the document, the new world it opened to her. With a pregnancy permit in her possession, she automatically became a desirable woman. A notice in the classified section of the paper would bring millionaires to her door.

But more important was the intoxicating knowledge that she could now hold in her arms a child of her own flesh and blood.

She turned to Canfield. Her eyes and her voice and her manner were almost pathetic. "It *is* genuine, isn't it?"

"You've got my word. Now let's get started."

And Kay realized she had changed—had become a different woman with a permit safely in her bag. Though she still doubted Sam Canfield, she had to gamble that what he'd told her was true. She was without the power to resist the temptation to go ahead. Her instincts were far stronger than her caution and her fears.

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"I'm ready," she said . . .

Johnny Barlow let himself quietly into an office he had rented a month before. It contained no furniture, nothing but a small, compact unit from which extended a long, tubular lens. The lens was pointed at one of the blank walls of the room.

Thus, it appeared to serve no purpose whatever. But the unit was one of the latest miracles to come out of the General Electronics laboratories. The theory behind it was extremely complicated but the functioning was quite simple. Given the material-content of the wall at which it was pointed, General Electronic's engineers were able to determine the obstruction-quotient involved and adjust the unit to photograph and record on film whatever lay beyond the wall. In this case, the interior of the *Advanced Neurological Institute.*

Johnny surveyed the unit glumly. What a waste of creative genius this was! A miracle-machine prostituted to the base purpose of spying on frustrated and harrassed women. Johnny checked the focus. He pushed the monitor button and bent down to inspect the interior of the Institute through the viewfinder.

Verban sat at his desk going over some papers. He was scowling over some detail of his dangerous business. Johnny watched as the camera silently recorded his every movement. How much money was Verban making? Johnny wondered. Enough to justify exposure and arrest? Arrest and execution? Convicted, Verban and Delano would be taken to the death house of a government prison and placed in an airtight room. A stream of flesh-consuming gas would be turned on and in five minutes even their bones would be gone.

A hideous way to die.

He straightened and turned away from the camera, then moved quietly out of the office, locking the door behind him, the camera sat quiet and ominous in the empty room.

Sam Canfield, hurrying up the corridor toward the *Advanced Neurological Institute,* stopped suddenly. "Quiet," he whispered, and pressed Kay Conway back against the wall.

The approaching footsteps grew louder and Sam Canfield looked about somewhat after the manner of a trapped rat. A few yards away he saw an

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exit sign over a door and pulled Kay toward it.

They just managed to get out of sight when Johnny Barlow came around the corner. They watched him through the tiny window in the door panel as he approached the elevator bank and pressed the signal button.

"I wonder what Johnny's doing here?" Kay whispered.

Canfield was scowling. "I wish I knew."

"Maybe Mr. Verban has been arrested."

"Not a chance. Barlow's got nothing to use against them." He stood for a moment in deep thought. "And he won't get anything. Let's go."

He strode on down the corridor, then stopped. "Well, are you coming?"

Kay Conway had not moved. A sharp twinge of conscience filled her eyes with sudden misery.

"Well?"

"All right—I'm coming." Kay raised her head and moved forward with firm steps.

From the moment they entered Verban's office it seemed to Kay that she was walking in a dream. Verban got up from his desk, his face sullen, his hatred for Canfield completely evident.

Canfield said, "All right. Let's get it over with." His contempt was as evident as Verban's hostility.

"Just like this?" Verban's voice was husky with anger. "Just like this you come in here and tell me what to do?"

"We've been through all that before. Take care of this girl and do it now. I'll wait around."

"It takes time to set up the equipment."

"That's a lotta crap. All you have to do is man the controls. Geniuses like Delano make these gadgets for idiots like you to run."

Verban doubled his fists. Then he turned suddenly upon Kay. He pointed to a screen. "Go back there. Take your clothes off. Put on the gown you'll find on the hook."

Numbly, Kay walked in the direction he indicated. Like a sleepwalker, she removed her dress. Dimly, above the roaring in her ears, she heard Canfield ask,

"By the way—what was Johnny Barlow doing in here?"

And Verban's surprised answer. "Barlow? I haven't seen him."

"Like hell you haven't. He was just in here."

"I said I haven't seen him."

Canfield's pause indicated bewilderment. "But we just

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met him coming down the hall."

"Did he see you?" There was fright in Verban's voice.

"No. We hid in the stairway. You're sure he didn't come in here?"

"I said he didn't," Verban snapped.

"Then where did he come from? What was he snooping after?"

"I haven't got the least idea."

"I think I'll do a little looking around. I'll be back . . ."

Kay heard Canfield leave and close the door behind him. She looked down at the robe she had donned. She shivered. "I'm ready."

"All right," Verban said. "Come on out."

As she emerged from behind the screen, Verban was staring after the departed Canfield. Worry reflected in his expression. Without looking at Kay, he indicated a padded table in one corner of the room. "Climb up there," he said absently.

Kay got on the table and after a few moments, Verban came over and looked down at her. He raised his hand and drew a cone-shaped piece of metal down from the ceiling where it was connected to a small horizontal tank by flexible tubing. He lowered it toward Kay's face.

She held out her hand in an instinctive motion. "Are you going to—?"

"We won't put you completely under. Just enough to stave off nausea when the ray hits you."

Kay closed her eyes and forced herself to relax. I'm in this for better or for worse, she told herself. For better or for worse.

Two deep breaths and the world swam before her. She felt the table move on its rubber wheels and sensed herself being transferred to a larger, brighter room.

She waited for what seemed a thousand lazy years. Then she was being lifted but there were no hands upon her body; rather a surge of singing power that swept upward and handled her as a wave of lifting air handles a leaf.

Then the power, holding her in mid-air, seem to intensify into a probing force. Kay wanted to scream. A feeling of entrapment brought hazy panic and her stomach began turning end-over-end. Now the nausea passed and all was fire and sound. *I'm dying,* her numbed mind said. *Burning — burning — flaming. Why doesn't someone help me? Johnny—Johnny . . .*

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Kay sank into a deep pit. Unconsciousness . . .

Another thousand years and she heard Canfield's voice. He was ripping Verban with his contempt. "The man moves right in next door to you and you don't even know it. What's the matter—are you blind?"

"I've taken about enough from you, Canfield!"

"You haven't even begun to take it yet. Letting a Welfare man get right next door—"

"How do you know it's Barlow?"

"There's a camera of some kind in there."

"But how do you know it belongs to him?"

"I *know,* that's all. We've got to—"

"All right. So Barlow does have a camera next door. What good is it going to do him? There's a wall between us."

"You haven't kept up on things, Verban. They've got a new kind of camera. Top secret. It shows right through walls."

Kay opened her eyes. The first thing she saw was Verbans sickly-pale face. Verban moaned, "My God! Right into our office—!"

"Now you get the idea."

"Let's go in and wreck the thing!"

"Don't be stupid. I've got an idea."

"This is no time for talking. We've got to act."

"Keep your pants on. When I get ideas they're good ones. We'll turn Barlow's own camera against him."

"How can we do that?"

"Barlow has to produce results. He wants a film. We'll give him one. But it'll do us more good than him."

"What's your idea?"

"Never mind now. I'll be back later." Canfield turned to Kay. "You feel okay?"

"I'm—all right."

"Then get your clothes on. I'll take you home."

Something deep inside Kay was outraged. As a woman, the experience she had just gone through had an almost sacred significance. There was a reverence about it that was being cruelly violated by these two evil, greedy men to whom reverence for anything was as far away as the stars.

She wanted to scream at them for their callousness and indifference. But instead, numbed by her own emotions, she got quietly off the table and went behind the screen. As she dressed, she tried to shut from her ears the hateful voices of Verban and Canfield.

Dimly, she heard Verban's

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whine: "I don't believe it's what you think it is. Maybe it isn't even a camera."

"All right," Canfield sneered. "Come on with me and I'll show you."

She heard them leave the office, so she was startled when she came from behind the screen to find she was not alone. An elderly, gentle-faced man with snow-white hair and stooped shoulders had come from somewhere and was staring thoughtfully at Verban's cluttered desk. He turned a pair of keen blue eyes on Kay and smiled.

The eyes held her. They seemed out of place in the aura of gentleness that seemed to surround the man. Kay said, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought—"

"It's quite all right, my dear. Are you a prospective patient?"

"No. I've already—"

"Oh, I see."

Kay did not know quite what to say—how to take this strange man—strange in the sense that he did not appear to fit into this nest of rascals. "You are Professor Delano?"

"Yes." His smile was sad. "I suppose the name makes me a lawless opportunist in your eyes."

"No—no, it doesn't. I feel —well, I feel wonderful!"

"Of course you do. For the first time in your life you are experiencing what it means to be a woman. All your vague yearnings are now translated into a reality."

"I *do* feel different—already."

"Some of it is psychological. But the physical aspect is there too." Delano's eyes narrowed in thought. "Then you don't feel I am a lawbreaker to have discovered the government's secret and made it available to you?"

"No, I'm glad you did."

"But there is another aspect. I have put you in a dangerous position. Your chances of escaping prison are remote."

"I don't care. They can put me in prison but they won't have a chance to stop me from having my baby." Kay's tone and manner were becoming more fiercely happy with each word. And new-born fire seemed to touch a chord in Delano. His face lit up. "There is something else I'm working on that may do you and all humanity a far greater good than the fertilization ray. That, in a sense, was mere piracy. This new combination is my own."

"It will be a greater blessing than—?"

"If I am successful—and

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only field tests remain—there may be a place for you—a place where you can have your child in peace."

"If such a thing came about I think—I think I'd worship you as a saint."

"Your smile is gratitude enough my dear." His smile was sad and he was very weary. Delano rubbed a slow hand across his forehead. "I must get back to work now. Good luck to you my dear—and come back and see me again."

Kay watched Delano until he closed the door behind him. Almost immediately the outer door opened and Canfield was scowling at her.

"You dressed?" he demanded.

"I'm ready."

"Then come on. I'll take you home. We've got some unfinished business."

A wild fear flashed into Kay's mind; that Canfield had cast himself in the role of her husband—the father of her child. Then she realized this was impossible. Canfield was not the type to seek reward in any such directions.

"What happened to Mr. Verban?"

Canfield growled deep in his throat. "The idiot's still in there goggling at Barlow's camera."

Back in the apartment, Canfield shucked off his coat and sat down on the lounge and pointed a fat finger at Kay. His face was tense, rapacious, evil. "Now this is what we're going to do . . ."

"I have an appointment for tomorrow at seven o'clock," Kay Conway said. "Verban wants the money then."

"I see." Johnny Barlow regarded her moodily. Something was obviously on his mind but his expression gave no inkling.

"Is—is there anything I must do?"

"Anything you must do?"

She got the impression he was deliberately baiting her. "I mean other than just go there and—?"

"Just go there and do as he says."

More than anything in the world, she wanted to say, *They're setting a trap for you. Go over and arrest both of them now or it will be too late. I'll testify against them even if it means prison for me.*

The urge to say these things sprang from a sudden new feeling—a warmth toward Johnny Barlow — his decency — his honesty — and

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perhaps something else. Suddenly he appeared to her as being very young, very unhappy, and very uncertain.

But another face stood in the way; that of Professor Delano. Kay felt a warmth for him also and could not throw him down the drain also, along with her own personal yearnings.

Johnny was eyeing her with speculation. "There's something—" He stopped.

"Yes?"

"Something different about you. I can't quite—"

Kay turned quickly away. Was it so obvious?

"You look rested — happier—"

"I got a good night's sleep last night."

She heard his sigh. "More than I got. Here."

Kay turned. He was holding forth the money. She took it silently, put it in her wallet. "When will I see you again?"

His smile was bitter. "Probably sooner than you expect. Good night." He walked swiftly to the door and went out without looking back.

But out in the street, he moved more slowly—pondering. Strange how suddenly you can see a girl for the first time; even after previously looking at her innumerable times. He wished now he had found some reason to reject her for the assignment during the first interview.

Deliberately, he put Kay from his mind—Kay as a person — and turned his thoughts to handling the assignment. There were several phases of it that bothered him but he saw no reason for changing his original plan.

Seven o'clock, he thought. I'll be there . . .

Johnny bent over the view-finder of the penetrating camera and saw Kay Conway enter Verban's office. Kay seemed nervous, uncertain.

Verban, very impersonal and businesslike, spoke briefly to Kay and motioned toward the screen. Kay disappeared, to emerge soon wearing a white gown. Her face was pale, making her eyes very large and dark. Eyes glued to the view-finder, Johnny felt an odd thickness in his throat. Kay wasn't just pretty, he realized. She was beautiful.

At a motion from Verban she stretched out on the table and he lowered the cone over her face. Then, a few moments later, he rolled the table through a doorway into the ray room.

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Johnny immediately moved the camera to the right along the wall until a bare, white room with an overhanging ray tube came into view. Verban placed the table into position and retired behind the control board. The camera silently recorded the scene . . .

"All right. Watch your hands. Back away from the board."

Verban whirled. Johnny Barlow stood in the doorway. There was a gun in his hand. Even with Canfield's previous assurances that everything would be all right, Verban was still frightened. He licked his dry lips. "What's this? Have you gone crazy?"

"This is an arrest."

"Why? We haven't broken any laws."

Johnny's eyes were on Kay as she got up from the table and drew the skimpy gown around her body.

"Come here," Johnny said.

Kay moved forward slowly. "Johnny, I—"

"This is a legitimate treatment. This patient has a prescription from a physician. There is no law against devitalizing an appendix."

Johnny's attention remained on Kay. He appeared to pay no attention to Verban. "Why did you do it, Kay?"

She flushed. "I—"

"This patient has done nothing wrong," Verban said.

"Fertilization is illegal."

"I told you we were devitalizing the appendix."

"Look, Verban. I know all about it. You planned to manipulate me into arresting you with a film of this treatment for evidence. Then you'd have a nice fat false arrest suit to throw at the *Welfare Bureau*. But it didn't work." Johnny paused, eyeing Verban with contempt. You can tell Sam Canfield it didn't work."

"I—I don't know anyone named Canfield."

"Cut it out, Verban."

Verban dredged up a little courage from somewhere. "Now listen! Quit trying to throw your weight around. You haven't got a leg to stand on. All you have is a film showing a perfectly legal operation."

"Then you admit Sam Canfield knew about the camera next door?"

"I admit nothing. The picture you've got will do you no good."

"Oh, yes it will. You see there was a little point Canfield overlooked. That camera takes a ninety-six hour load. The other night when I was adjusting it I forgot to turn

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it off. So I went in there today and what did I find? The complete story of an illegal fertilization. The one you did earlier on Miss Conway."

Verban went deathly white. Johnny turned to Kay. "Why did you do it? Why couldn't you have gone along with me? Now—" he shrugged.

Kay's shoulders straightened. She raised her head proudly. "I know that I betrayed your trust. But I don't care. They'll throw me in jail and I'll probably never have my baby. But I did my best. I tried."

Johnny's face hid the emotion within him. He knew now—at this moment—that he loved Kay Conway. And he was realistic enough to know why. The fertilization had changed her—made her a complete woman. And a complete woman was a rarity in these times when Government had set itself above Nature.

"I can't help you, Kay."

"But I can try to help myself!"

Kay's cheeks were bright with defiance. Johnny thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He said, "I've got to take you in."

"I know that. But I'll still try to have my baby. With the warden—the jailer—the guard! I don't care who the father will be!"

Johnny choked down the torment in his heart. "Don't talk like that!"

Her eyes were bright. "I'd even try to seduce you if I had the chance!"

"Listen," Verban croaked. "Isn't there something we can do about this? Can't we make a deal? It's absurd. We're intelligent men. You and I."

"There's no need for any deals."

The voice was that of Sam Canfield — cold, hard, contemptuous. The rear door had opened silently and Canfield had a gun pointed at Johnny's back. "Drop the gun, Barlow. This is an arrest."

For a moment Johnny was tempted to whirl and shoot it out. Then the front door opened and a tall man in the uniform of a *Population Control Bureau* guard stood just outside. Johnny dropped his gun.

Later, he realized that was a mistake; and realized too, how much of a gambler and how clever Canfield was. Canfield had banked on his dropping it.

The thing was staged very neatly. The guard remained just outside the door while Canfield said in a low voice,

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"Verban, pick up Barlow's pistol."

Automatically, Verban took a forward step and bent down to obey. Instantly, the guard sprang into the room, leveled his own weapon and shot Verban through the heart, killing him instantly.

"You damned idiot!" Canfield yelled. "Have you gone crazy?"

The guard lowered his gun sheepishly. "I saw him going for that gun, boss. A prisoner going for a gun is—"

"I told him to pick it up."

"I was outside. I didn't hear you."

"Smart work, Canfield," Johnny said. "That little scene is now recorded on the film in the camera next door. It will look pretty good. Nobody watching it can accuse you of murder. But you got rid of a dangerous witness."

Canfield was an actor. His surprise appeared genuine. "A witness? To what?"

"To the racket you've been running here."

"What racket?" Canfield was honestly enjoying this.

"The one you've been running with Verban. We could have broken him down in fifteen minutes."

"You're way off base, man!"

"You got the three thousand I gave Kay, didn't you?"

Canfield grinned. "Why don't you ask her?"

"You sold her a counterfeit pregnancy permit."

"I said—why don't you ask her?"

Johnny turned to where Kay stood clutching the scant white robe. And he knew there was no use asking. Damn Canfield! He knew how to plug every gap. He had killed the weak witness and paid off the strong one. He had given Kay something she was willing to pay for with her life if necessary, and her loyalty, while open to question on moral grounds, would remain absolute.

"Okay," Johnny said, "but we've still got Delano. We'll be able to break him down." As he spoke, Johnny was struck by the sudden change in Kay. She turned pale. Her defiance melted away. This puzzled him, but Canfield caught his attention with a short, smug statement.

"I never met Delano in my life."

And Johnny knew he spoke the truth. Again Canfield's cleverness was made manifest. He would be very careful to have as few connections as possible. "All right. I'm convinced. You've done a fine

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job of covering yourself. Now tell me what's behind this raid?"

"Simple. The *Population Bureau* allocates certain enforcement duties to other bureaus, but we still hold the whip — the real authority. And we like nothing better than to turn up a corrupt government employee in *any* bureau."

"What's the frame?"

"I don't understand you," Canfield said with mock innocence. "If you mean why am I here, the answer is simple. We've been watching you, Barlow. I'm pretty sure you have been blackmailing Verban with films of his operations here. You're lucky he was accidently killed because, as you said, we could have broken him down in ten minutes. But I think I can make the charge stick. We're taking you to jail."

Johnny was instantly suspicious. "To what jail?"

"To the *Population Bureau's* detention cells, of course."

Now Johnny had Canfield's whole plan, and in spite of his anger, he admired the scoundrelly little fat man. Canfield was the rare type who could turn on a dime. He had planned originally to maneuver Johnny into pulling Verban in with an eye toward a false-arrest suit. He had obviously been listening at the door and when he realized Johnny had films of the actual fertilization, he reversed his whole attack in a matter of seconds and moved in with his *Population Bureau* guard. Probably he'd had the guard present just in case anything went wrong. The plan to get Verban out of the way was devised and executed all in this invariably short time. And Canfield of course had possession of the film tape now. Before anyone saw it a job of cutting would be done.

And Canfield's next move was quite obvious. Johnny would be taken to the *Population Bureau's* detention cells and would not come out alive. Something would happen to him. No one would ever find out quite what but with the threat of corruption in the air, Johnny's chief wouldn't be too interested in finding out.

Canfield had him. You just stepped out of your league, boy, Johnny told himself. He turned and saw Professor Delano standing in the doorway behind Canfield.

Delano had a gun in his hand. His position was such that neither Canfield nor the guard could see him. Then

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he said, "Drop those guns and put your hands up, gentlemen or I shall kill you."

There was a quick, passing question in Johnny's mind as both Canfield and the guard dropped their guns. They had not been able to see Delano, but he had been in Kay's range of vision. She had seen him, yet she had not warned Canfield of the danger.

Why not? Johnny was at a loss to figure out the loyalties and crosspurposes of this group. Kay would stand with Canfield against Johnny, yet she allowed Delano, a man she could scarcely know, to disarm Canfield. What lay behind this?

But Johnny had little time to ponder because now Canfield was facing Delano with a terrible scowl. "Put that gun down, you fool!"

Delano regarded Canfield with a kind of impersonal loathing. "So you're the scoundrel my partner was consorting with."

"What are you talking about?" Uncertain of himself —at least momentarily—Canfield said, "You're ten feet deep in this thing right now."

"I'll admit my guilt. There is little left to do. But I'll see to it you don't kill anyone else before we leave this laboratory."

Canfield smiled. "Now Professor Delano. Let's talk sense. You don't quite understand what's gone on here. I'm sorry I said you were implicated because I'm sure you're not. Your partner was killed through a grievous accident. I discovered he was being blackmailed by this *Welfare Bureau* agent and I moved in. The government is always on the lookout for dishonest employees and—"

Canfield was moving casually toward Delano. Johnny yelled, "Look out! he's going to grab your gun!"

As Johnny cried out, Canfield lunged. But he found Delano far more alert and agile than he appeared to be. He moved nimbly to the side and Canfield crashed into the wall. He turned, regained his balance, and helplessly pawed the air.

It was quite obvious that he realized what he had lost. A bad gamble. He might have been able to win Delano over but the temptation to risk everything on a quick and deciding play had been too great.

"There's your answer, Professor Delano," Johnny said.

"So it appears."

"Now wait a minute," Can-

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field said. "You can't get away with this. Put down that gun and I'll forget this happened. I only want you for a witness anyhow. And I promise you immunity."

"I think not," Delano said qiuetly. The question I'm debating is whether or not I should kill you."

Canfield knew the true meaning of fear. Delano had spoken without anger, almost gently, but Canfield knew he was a man who made decisions without excitement or fanfare. And that once made, these decisions were acted upon. Canfield felt himself very near death.

Johnny also sensed this. He said, "Professor Delano, our best bet is to get out of here—to hide until we've had a little time to think. Killing isn't the answer but if we go with Canfield we're dead."

Delano thought this over. "Very well," he said.

Johnny picked up the two guns that lay on the floor. He kept his eyes off Kay deliberately ignoring her as he moved toward Delano.

The latter said, "There is something I must take with me. Wait here a moment."

When he returned, he was carrying a square box about a foot in all dimensions. He held it carefully as though fearing accident. "I am not l e a v i n g," Delano said, "through physical fear. My reason is far more important than the life of anyone in this room."

"We can discuss that later," Johnny said. "We've got to move."

Delano hesitated. "The girl—will she remain here?"

Johnny looked directly at Kay for the first time since Canfield lost his position of dominance. "Do you want to go with us?"

His voice was cold and impersonal and even as he spoke he inwardly cursed his inability to be otherwise. In his heart he wanted to say, *Let's forget everything that's happened and start over. I'm in love with you and I want you to be with me and I want to be with you.*

But he could only look at her coldly and upon seeing this, Kay spoke in a dull, lifeless voice. "No. I'll stay here."

Johnny turned to Canfield. "Give us time to clear the building. If I see you on our tail I'll kill you."

Canfield said nothing as Johnny crossed the room and tore the phone box from the wall. At the door he looked back and said, "You can have the film in the machine. To

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hell with it." Then he was hurrying Professor Delano toward the elevator . . .

Arnold Craig, Chief of *Welfare,* and Norton Todd, Chief of *Population Control,* faced each other over a small conference table. Neither wanted to lose face by going to the other's office, so the meeting was held in a neutral conference room.

Todd was a big florid-faced man who had expertly clawed his way up through government service. Beside him, Craig was a cocky amateur. But still no bumbling operator.

Norton Todd said, "We'll keep this on a strictly confidential basis, Craig. After all, I wouldn't want you to get a black mark upstairs."

The term *upstairs* was always used to designate the officials so sancrosant nobody mentioned names. "I think possibly the danger lies in the other direction, Craig said coldly. "My man Barlow was on an assignment that had my complete sanction."

"Trying to uncover corruption in my bureau?"

"Trying to stop lawbreaking that should really be the responsibility of your bureau."

"Well, the fact remains that Canfield tried to arrest this Barlow and as a result Barlow is now a fugitive from justice."

"We have only Canfield's word for what happened."

"There is also the guard and the girl."

"The girl won't talk. The guard would say anything Canfield told him to."

"The girl will talk eventually."

"There is also the matter of a killing. Accidental or not, your man held the gun."

"Not very important, really, now is it?"

"I think so. They were running an illegal fertilization racket. Tests show the girl to be fertile."

"But there is no supporting evidence to show it was done at the *Advanced Neurological* place."

"It certainly wasn't done in any barroom."

Todd did not answer and the two men eyed each other warily. The thrusts had been experimental, each testing the other's temper and skill.

They both knew the nature of the stake. Whether or not this affair would demand the attention of those upstairs, and if so, who was going to get the black eye. Either man would sacrifice an underling or two if in so-doing his own

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prestige would be protected. But at the moment the wisest thing to do was to defend one's own.

"Let's face it," Craig said. "Your man Canfield is as corrupt as they come—and as smart."

"Have you any proof of that?"

"I think Barlow did."

Todd smiled. "But Barlow is on the run himself."

Craig knew his position was tactically weak. But he allowed his face and manner to give no hint of this. "Tell you what we ought to do," he said easily. "Quash the whole thing. When Barlow turns up I'll give him a stiff talking to and we'll drop all inter-departmental charges."

Todd experienced a moment of triumph. A poor tactician, this Craig. He'd acknowledged weakness. The thing to do then was to drive ahead. Hammer your man down. The weak had no right to survive.

"After all," Craig was saying, "the ray treatment place is out of business and that's what we both wanted."

"I'm not in agreement," Todd said frostily. "I don't see how we can condone corruption in our bureaus. I'm surprised you would suggest it. I'm afraid we'll have to blow this thing open and let the guilty take their medicine."

You hypocritical slob, Craig thought. Pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?

And it was as if Todd had read his thought. Todd said, "After all—my man isn't a fugitive from justice."

Craig realized he had given Todd a clew to the weakness of his position by offering the compromise. A fatal mistake. But he was comparatively new at this game and not as wary as the old veterans. He got up from his chair. "When Barlow is captured I want him. I'll discipline him myself."

Todd regarded the harrassed *Welfare* head with pity. Too bad such a young man had to go down the drain. "That," Todd said stiffly, "is of course impossible."

"Then you'll report the case upstairs?"

"Of course."

"I guess we have no more to say to each other then." Craig left, cursing his luck. Todd held all the cards. The film Canfield had turned in showed the killing in its entirety. Even without verbal testimony it was practically conclusive.

Craig went back to his office. Might as well use it

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while he had it. That wouldn't be for long. If only Johnny Barlow would come in before Sam Canfield located him. Craig had a feeling Johnny had been framed. But if things were allowed to take their natural course, there could be one answer. Barlow was through.

There was a sound at the door. It opened. Craig looked up.

Johnny Barlow walked into the office. There was a distinguished looking elderly man with him. The elderly man carried a small square box . . .

Kay Conway sat huddled in one of the *Population Control* detention cells. She had been lodged in the isolation block and strict orders had been given that no one except the Chief and Sam Canfield were to contact her. Canfield even brought her meals.

She ate little, however, living mainly upon the dregs of her misery and self condemnation. How could she have been such a traitor to Johnny Barlow? How could she have betrayed truth and justice? How could she have felt anything to be more precious than honesty and self respect?

No use asking herself these questions over and over. It was too late. And there was scant comfort in the fact she had returned to her senses and defied Canfield. All it had gotten her was this isolation cell. No chance to undo the wrong she had done Johnny Barlow. The man to whom she owed her loyalty.

The man she loved.

The thought came to her mind and she forced it resolutely out. She had no right to love him.

But it was nice to think about. Comforting . . .

At that moment, there was the sound of approaching footsteps. Canfield of course. Or perhaps both he and Arnold Todd. Both men had threatened her direfully in order to win her back to deceit and corruption. It would do them no good if they'd come to try again. She would die here before she would veer again from the truth.

Canfield's fat, ugly face. His leer. "Somebody to see you, honey. An old friend. He's got a permit from Todd. Ten minutes. Guess my boss is a pretty soft-hearted guy."

Johnny Barlow stepped close to the bars. Kay sprang forward and her heart went through the bars to him. "Johnny—Johnny!"

"It's all right, darling.

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Everything's going to be all right."

Canfield looked up from his examination of the permit. His grin deepened. "It is?" Then he looked swiftly back at the permit and the leer vanished. "Hey! This is a forgery! The boss never—"

"That's r i g h t, Canfield. You fumbled."

Canfield jerked his head up. He was looking into the barrel of a gun that had come out of Johnny's pocket.

Johnny said, "Now, you scum—open this cell or I'll blow your fat belly right into your backbone."

His tone was such that Canfield did not hesitate. Canfield knew truth when it was hurled at him with that much hatred. He fell over himself unlocking the cell.

"Inside."

Canfield scooted into the cell like a hog into its pen and Johnny locked the door. Once inside, Canfield found the courage to snarl, "You'll regret this, Barlow!"

"Maybe. Come on, Kay."

"Where are we going?"

"Out of here. And I'll kill anyone who tries to stop us!"

"Johnny! You shouldn't have risked it."

"I found out too late how much I'd risk for you."

"But what h a p p e n e d? How—"

"An awful lot has happened. You're in the clear, honey. You've broken no law. All they can get you on is a technicality and maybe not that."

"Johnny! I don't understand."

They were moving through a deserted section of the cell block. No one as yet had challenged their way. "Canfield's racket was so simple it was completely deceptive. It was made possible by lax integration and book work in the *Population Control Bureau.* You see, when they issued pregnancy permits, there was no follow-up. No *liaison* between the government fertility labs and the *Bureau.* Women got their permits and it was taken for granted they went straight to the lab and most of them did, but no law said they had to and the records of the two places were not properly integrated."

"I don't understand. You mean—?"

"Sure. Your mother registered you when you were a girl, didn't she?"

"Of course."

"Well. You were one of the lucky ones. You were issued a permit in the regular course of business."

"I got a permit—legally?"

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"Right. Canfield's racket was that he followed up—delivered the permits in person—told women he was getting them in some mysterious manner and demanded money. Naturally there was never any kickback."

"Why the rotten — then everything is all right, isn't it, Johnny?"

His face was grim. "All right?"

"Well—you're here. You went into hiding—you came out."

"I gambled. Professor Delano and I had a lot of time to talk. He's made a discovery that's revolutionary. Something about combining wavelength of the sonar range to a very complicated multi-crossfrequency that controls weather."

"Is—is it important?"

Johnny stopped and turned his eyes on her. "Important? Darling, with that thing he can open the continents at the North and South poles. Turn them into tropical lands if he wants to. Do you understand what that means?"

"More room for the people of the globe!"

"Of course!"

"Then everything is all right?"

Johnny again turned grim. "Oh no! You know how things work in government. So slow. And sometime so completely unjust. We gave the machine to my boss, Arnold Craig, and he took it upstairs. We thought it might tip things in our favor, but Todd is a powerful man. We heard nothing. Time went by. We evidently lost out and I got pretty sure Craig wouldn't be able to cover me much longer, so I made the break."

"You came after me!"

"As soon as I was able to locate you."

"And now what will happen?"

"I don't know, baby. It could be pretty bad. We may not even get out of here. If we do we'll go underground. We'll have to. I—I love you. I want to be the—"

He spoke doggedly, looking straight ahead. Kay's hand tightened on his arm. "I want you to be—darling."

Johnny had no time to answer because, suddenly, three *Population Control* guards blocked the way. "This is it," he whispered, then barked. "One side. We haven't got anything to lose. You have."

They hesitated for a moment, confused, sensing something was wrong, then knowing it when Johnny spoke and revealed his gun. He wished

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he had tried to bluff through but it was too late.

And they were not cowards. They went for their weapons and Johnny's hand squeezed down on his own trigger. Just before it went all the way, a new element entered the picture.

Sudden activity out front, and a dozen *Welfare Bureau* men came into view. "That will be all!" Arnold Craig snapped. "We're taking over."

Craig came forward. "I figured you did some damn-fool thing like this. Lucky I checked and got over here in time. It was a crazy stunt."

Johnny grinned. "Yes, sir. It was . . ."

They all sat in a big conference room. A poker-faced man from upstairs presided. "The plan brought forward by Professor Delano has been approved to the extent that a field trial will be financed at the North pole. A new Chief of Welfare Security will be appointed and Mr. Craig will be advanced to a higher post. The expedition will come under his jurisdiction.

"The *Bureau of Public Welfare* and the *Population Control Bureau* will be merged at a later date—that is at Mr. Craig's convenience, and both will come under his very able supervisory scope."

The man from upstairs turned cold eyes on Norton Todd, then looked with complete contempt at Sam Canfield.

"Todd—there was no *Mr.* —and his assistant are adjudged incompetent and dishonest. Their punishment, if any, will be left in Mr. Craig's hands." The man stood up. "Are there any questions or statements?"

Craig arose also. "I'd like to keep Todd in his present position," he said. But his eyes said more. Todd read what the eyes said and cringed.

"A very generous gesture," the man from upstairs said. "Good day, gentlemen."

"And I'd like to have Canfield at the pole with us," Johnny said. "I think perhaps he needs reeducation."

"A generous gesture," Craig said with a half-smile.

Later, Kay pulled Johnny around and put her face close to his. "You didn't tell me we were going to the North pole. In fact you didn't tell me about the expedition. But you knew. How?"

"We got an advance word."

"Wonderful, darling," Kay whispered. "There or any place—as long as I'm with you."

THE END

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Dream Girl

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

You're a movie censor. You view all the Hollywood pictures and cut out all the bathroom scenes. Then a situation develops whereby you have to find a girl you saw in a censored scene. But you didn't really look at her. All you saw was a cute little birthmark on her — well, anyhow, that's all you've got to go by. Happy hunting!

THE girl was incredibly lovely. Peter Winston watched her breathlessly as she climbed out of the bath, reached out for a towel, and slowly, languidly, proceeded to dry herself.

She was a blonde, with long, delicious legs and a body to match. Her face was turned away, and Peter wondered if it lived up to the rest of her. He guessed that it would. She was singing softly as she dried herself. Her voice was a low, throaty purr that drew Peter's attention like a magnet. Peter did a good imitation of a gaping idiot.

Dropping the towel, the girl moved toward a robe hanging near the door. Suddenly there came the sound of a sharp knock.

"Are you there, Elizabeth?" said a male voice, in a cultured British accent.

"Just a moment, Jeffrey," the girl replied. She took down the robe and in a quick motion drew it around her nude form. Peter noticed, as she wrapped the robe around her, one solitary blemish marring her perfection—a small, odd, heart-shaped birthmark centered in the small of her back. Curiously, it seemed to him to heighten her attractiveness.

The robe, a clinging, diaphanous pink affair, left her even more naked-looking than her previous state of total nudity. She tied the belt in an elaborate knot, stretched voluptuously, and opened the door.

The man with the British accent was waiting there. He

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Only a cad would stare at the girl. All right—so he was a cad. 45

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was tall, suave, utterly self-possessed. In one smooth motion he stepped inside and enfolded her in his arms.

"It's been a long time, Elizabeth," he said.

"I know, Jeffrey, darling, I know," the girl replied, in her deep, exciting voice.

Their lips met in passionate fervor as they clung to each other like two glued statues.

"All right, that's enough," Peter said, in a bored voice. "Cut it there. That scene definitely has to come out. Lights, please."

The lights in the small projection-room blinked on. Peter looked up at the booth in the back. "Got that, Joe?" he called. "Cut all the frames from—oh, the beginning of the bath scene. It's obviously got to go."

"I've got it, Mr. Winston," said a voice from the booth. "The last couple of hundred feet, right?"

"Now just one minute, Winston," burst out another voice, angrily. "This censorship business can be carried too far. You're ruining my film!"

Peter turned to confront the new speaker. He was Reynold St. Cloud, the producer, writer, director, and assistant cameraman of *Empty Love,* the film in question.

"You can't yank every scene with a woman in it," St. Cloud protested hotly. "You censors have no sense of artistic achievement, of esthetic principles, of—"

"My esthetic principles are beyond reproach, Mr. St. Cloud," Peter said coldly. "Which is why I've been given this highly responsible job. As one of the arbiters of what the American motion picture public should see and what it should not see, it appears perfectly obvious to me that your new movie is a wanton piece of pornography, a vicious, obscene—"

"I know," St. Cloud said tiredly. "They all told me you'd rip it to shreds before it got past your office. They told me not to bother filming it, because Peter Winston was such an iron-clad puritan that I might just as well junk the film as try to get it approved."

"You want me to throw this guy out, Mr. Winston?" said the projection-room man. "If he's bothering you, it won't be any trouble—"

"Let me handle it, Joe," Peter said. He turned to face St. Cloud, who was a short, stubby man whose eyes were boring solidly forward into

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Peter's necktie. "Look, Mr. St. Cloud," Peter said, "there are certain things that are fit to be shown on the screen and things which are not. And that bathroom scene in *Empty Love* is the most torrid bit of flagrant pornography I've seen since that French film I threw out last year. It just *has* to go."

"Pornography?" St. Cloud was irate. "What do you take me for? Winston, I tell you that film is *art*. It's *me*, Winston, it sums up all my strivings, my goals, my esthetic ideals, my entire philosophy! Why, cutting out a scene of that film is like cutting off an arm, or a leg. I can't do it. I refuse."

"Then the film will not get a seal of approval from this office," Peter said.

"I'll take it over your head!" St. Cloud stormed. "You're just an underling here, anyway. Your boss will understand."

"Mr. Green will back me up on anything," Peter said calmly. "The film will not get through."

"Then I'll release it without a seal of approval," St. Cloud said. "I'll break this censorship business if I have to break myself in the process!"

Peter nodded affably. "Fair enough. Would you mind leaving, now? I have four other films to review today, and you're not the only producer in Hollywood."

The little man gathered up his briefcase and stormed toward the door of the projection-room. After he got halfway there, he turned back to shake a fist at Peter.

"I want to tell you something. Winston — something I've been thinking a long time. I know why you became a censor and why you take such glee in cutting movies to shreds. It's because you're twisted! You're perverted!"

"Just a *minute*, Mr. St. Cloud!"

"Don't interrupt me! I know your type. Deep down, in your subconscious mind, you're longing to see nude women—all the time. Admit it! You mentally undress every girl you see. But you're so much of a twisted puritan that you refuse to admit it consciously; you repress that desire and compensate for your frustrations by becoming a censor. That way you can keep *everyone* from seeing what you won't allow yourself to see? Am I right?"

Peter turned to the projection-room man, mustering all his self-control. "I think you'd better throw him out after all, Joe. I should have

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expected this kind of talk from him."

"I'll save you the trouble," St. Cloud said, and ducked nimbly and swiftly out through the door before any further difficulties arose.

Peter shrugged off St. Cloud's tirade and sat back, prepared to give his full attention to the next film up for review. He was accustomed to having to eject angry producers and/or directors; nobody ever liked to have even the smallest part of his film cut, and all of them reacted the same way; by making some personal accusation about the censor's own private life.

It was, Peter thought, inevitable. He shook his head and smiled as the light went out and the screen brightened. The idea, accusing him of being—well, strange.

The new film was a battle story. Peter leaned forward in his seat, ready to watch hawk-eyed for any strong language that would have to come out. He had a strict sense of the proprieties, Peter did; that was what made him such a good censor.

The movie, happily, was letter-perfect, without any stray expletives marring its ninety minutes. When it was over, Peter signalled for the lights.

"That'll do, Joe," he said. "Mark it *passed*."

"Thank you, Mr. Winston," bubbled a small, effervescent man Peter recognized as the producer. "Thank you so much!"

"Don't thank me," Peter said, holding up a hand modestly. "Thank yourself for having good taste — unlike some of your colleagues. Next picture, please, Joe."

At the end of the day—by which time another film had been scissored drastically and another quarrel with a producer had taken place—Peter checked out and, climbing into his new MG, drove out to his bachelor apartment in North Hollywood, with the satisfying feeling that his duty had been done.

As he opened the door and greeted the fluffy terrier who was his sole companion, he found himself dwelling on what St. Cloud had said. This was unusual; most of the vituperation hurled at him by movie men generally went in one ear and out the other, but St. Cloud's words had struck deep. For St. Cloud had come uncomfortably close to the truth.

Peter *enjoyed* the scenes he was called upon to censor.

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Although his firm sense of morality made him an excellent guardian of public taste, he, personally, as Peter Winston, lonely young man, not as Peter Winston, film censor, relished the scenes it was his daily job to delete. And, many a time, he found himself wishing he could see a second time the actresses whose over-revealed charms he sliced from this movie and that.

Particularly, Peter thought, as he settled in his favorite armchair with a copy of his current reading, Joyce's *Ulysses,* particularly that girl with the birthmark.

As the evening wore on, the impact of the scene he had expunged that morning began to grow considerably on him. The sight of that lithe figure climbing from her bath, the sheer poetry of her motions as she donned the robe, the low throbbing of her voice—above all, the tiny birthmark in the small of her back—

At ten past eleven Peter threw down the book. The problems of Leopold Bloom no longer held his interest; he had a bigger one of his own.

He had to find that girl.

He rushed to the phone and hurriedly dialed a number.

"Hello?" barked a familiar voice. "St. Cloud speaking."

"Mr. St. Cloud?" Peter said, disguising his voice. "I'm—I'm a fan of yours. I've seen all your movies since *Torture of Sin* back in '38."

"Glad of it," St. Cloud said. "What's on your mind."

"It's a girl, sir," Peter said hesitantly. "She's an actress in your latest movie. I'm trying to get in touch with her."

"Which movie? My latest's not out yet."

Suddenly Peter realized he had blundered. No one but Peter Winston had viewed *Empty Love* yet, and Peter Winston did not dare let St. Cloud find out what was on his mind. He fumbled and coughed for a moment, mumbled apologetically into the phone, and hung up.

St. Cloud was out. After the accusation the fiery producer had thrown at him that morning, Peter could hardly afford to give him any more ammunition by admitting that the censored scene had stirred him. Instead, he rang up a friend of his—a casting director for one of the big studios.

"Phil? Peter Winston."

"What's new, Pete? Censored any good films lately?"

"Quit the kidding," Peter said. "I want a favor."

"What sort? I've got a good tip on the fourth at—"

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"No," Peter said impatiently. "I'm looking for a girl—an actress. Maybe you can help me. Don't know her name, don't even know what she looks like. All I know is she's tall, blonde, a knockout of a figure, and she has a heart-shaped birthmark in the small of her back."

There was silence for a moment as the other thought. "Sorry, Pete. I can think of a hundred girls who fit the bill, right up to but not including that birthmark bit. What's the scoop, anyway? You hot on the trail of some nefarious producer?"

"I'll tell you some other time, Phil," Peter said, and hung up.

He stared at the floor for a long time, scrubbing his heels angrily into the thick, luxurious green broadloom carpeting.

He *had* to find the girl. Her desirability seemed to be growing by geometric progression as the hours moved along. This was the first time Peter had experienced any such sensations. He had seen plenty of semi-dressed and un-dressed showgirls since coming to Hollywood, of course, but this new, mysterious creature excited his interest in a way none of the others had. It was her voice, he thought, and the way she moved, and that tremendously appealing birthmark.

That was his only clue. She had a birthmark on the small of her back. Fine, Peter thought. Just go around snooping at starlets' backs until I find the right one.

I can just see it now, he thought miserably. "Would you please take your clothes off, miss? I want to see if you have a birthmark, because if you do I'm in love with you."

Sure, sure. He shuddered. Years of bachelorhood plus the puritanical nature of his daily work would make it utterly inconceivable that he'd ever do such a thing.

How then? He shook his head. There was no way at all. He picked up *Ulysses* from where he had dropped it, reached for his glasses, and put them on. He started to read, and after exploring a couple of pages paused to reflect that the book would make quite a movie; except that it could never get past the censor.

Idly, he glanced down at his foot. Then he looked again. He was barefoot. His shoe had suddenly disappeared.

That's strange, he thought. I *feel* a shoe—but there's none there!

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He looked at his other foot, and saw bare toes only. But when he reached down he felt the hard, shiny surface of his shoe. And, as he saw his arm, he discovered that the expensive dacron lounging robe he'd been wearing had vanished also!

Puzzled, he sprang up and confronted himself in the mirror.

He was completely naked.

And yet—yet, he felt as if he were still wearing clothes. Shaking his head, he reached up, and, as a sudden weird suspicion occurred to him, he took off his glasses.

Miraculously, his lounging robe and shoes reappeared.

"Just like magic," said a deep voice from somewhere behind him.

Peter looked around, startled, but couldn't see anybody. He began to sense a definite *presence* of some sort in the room, though. "What's going on?" he asked firmly.

"Don't worry," the voice said. "I've brought you a little gift. No, you needn't look around, because you won't be able to see me with or without your new glasses. But you can see—shall we say, other things?"

"What do you mean? Who are you?"

"Never mind that," the voice said. "Put the glasses on and go to the window."

Mystified, Peter obeyed. He drew the blind and looked out into the darkness. Then he whistled.

A pretty girl was going by, walking her dog. By the light of the full moon Peter could see both of them plainly. The dog was wearing no collar. No leash restrained him. And the girl had on not a stitch of clothing.

Hastily, Peter ripped the glasses off, and collar, leash, and dress appeared instantly. Peter whirled to face the invisible presence.

"You're a devil to tempt me!" He held out the glasses. "Here, take these wicked things."

The other's reply was couched in amused tones. "But I brought them especially for you, my friend. Your guess is partially right, by the way, I *am* from, shall we say, the lower regions. But no, don't tremble. I'm not here to *tempt* you; that's already been done. I'm here to help you, Peter."

"Help me? What's your game?"

"Use your somewhat petrified brain, my friend. What better device is there for finding a girl with a birthmark than—"

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"—glasses that see through clothing! But—but—"

"No buts, Peter. The glasses are yours, with no strings attached. You haven't sold your soul, you haven't even damned yourself. It merely suits our purposes to give you these glasses just now, to lead you to your heart's desire. Your happiness will be our happiness. No salesman will call."

"Hold on a second," Peter said, but it was to no avail. He stood as though rooted to the floor and heard a strange whistling sound, as of air rushing out of a room, and then he knew he was alone.

Too bewildered to do anything else, Peter sat down weakly in the armchair and examined the glasses. They looked like ordinary ones, with conventional red plastic rims and perhaps slightly too-thick lenses. His own glasses had disappeared. He put the new ones on, flinching momentarily as his robe once again vanished, and picked up the book. He opened it at random and read a few lines. The glasses were in perfect focus, as if he'd had the optometrist turn out the prescription that very morning. Aside from their more unusual properties, they were a perfectly serviceable pair of spectacles.

He tooked them off and paced up and down, feeling a powerful inner conflict. They came from Below; that he did not doubt. Therefore they were probably dangerous. And was it right to use them? Did he have any moral justification that stripped away the pretenses of society?

No, Peter thought. I can't do it.

The thought staggered him. To go out into Hollywood's palm-lined streets wearing them, to spy on the myriads of lovely starlets, to uncover the secrets of the aging big names, to walk silently and stealthily among hordes of nude and delightful—

It was incredible. After years of almost ascetic loneliness, suddenly he, Peter Winston, held in his hand the key that could open the door to the world's beauty! He could sell the glasses for millions, billions!

He weighed them in his hands. It was a loathsome thought. To become a Peeping-Tom on a colossal scale, to go drooling through the streets wearing the glasses—he could never bring himself to use them that way. But what was it the mysterious voice had said? The glasses

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were a personal loan, a favor, something to help him. That was it: the glasses had another, more noble function.

Peter smiled. Some place in Hollywood was a girl with a birthmark in a part of her back not readily visible to the naked eye. Peter was in love with her. And now Peter knew he was going to find her.

"Whoever, *where*ever you are, thank you," he said out loud, hoping the strange presence was listening.

*

The night seemed to last forever. Peter tossed and turned, seeing before him over and over again the scene he had censored, seeing the girl climb dripping from the tub and stretch a graceful arm out for her towel. After hours, he fell into an uneasy sleep, and still the girl haunted his dreams. By the time morning came, he felt completely exhausted.

He shaved and drove down to his office, where, as usual, half a dozen men were waiting, portfolios under their arms, for their films to be reviewed by one or another of the Office's censorship staff.

"Hello, Peter," said a familiar gruff voice as he entered.

"Good morning, J. G.," Peter said. It was J. G. Green, the head of the office, the czar of Hollywood's film industry.

"All set for a busy day, Peter?"

Peter nodded absently. His thoughts were still fixed on the small of a certain girl's back. "Yes, sir," he said. "I've got my scissors all sharpened, sir."

"Fine, fine," Mr. Green said. His eyebrows narrowed. "Say, Peter," he said, as Peter began to walk away, "before you begin—I received a note this morning from St. Cloud. I think you know the gentleman."

Peter nodded icily.

"It seems you did an extra-comprehensive job on his latest film, and he's quite upset about it."

"The film was vile, J. G.," Peter said firmly.

"I don't doubt it. I have implicit faith in your judgment. You know that, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"St. Cloud had some truly vicious things to say about you," Mr. Green continued. "I can't show you his note, because it was so disgusting I burned it immediately. But I can tell you I called him at once and defended you wholeheartedly. I'm one hundred percent back of you, my boy. Someday I expect you to be in

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charge here, Peter," he said in rotund tones, gesturing paternally. "I've been grooming you for that since you gave up acting to work here. I can't let any producer malign you so wantonly, can I?"

"Thank you, sir."

"Of course. But tell me," the short, tubby czar said, lowering his voice, "none of these things are true, are they? What St. Cloud said about you? I don't mean to imply — I mean — you just can't be too careful, that's all."

"Of course, sir," Peter said, feeling his face go hot and red with shame. He waved his hands around, not knowing what to do with them in his confusion, and finally plunged them into his pockets.

"It's simply that the sort of things St. Cloud said about you," Green went on, "are so vicious, so completely incredible — you deny them, of course?"

"I don't know what the accusations are, sir," Peter said, nervously. "So how can I deny them?" He darted his eyes from right to left, glancing around the office to see if anyone was overhearing the inquisition. Finally, to take some of the pressure off himself by doing something, he took his glasses out and made an elaborate show of cleaning them.

Now it was Mr. Green's turn to become flustered. "I suppose I shouldn't have destroyed St. Cloud's note," he said. "But I couldn't bear to keep such a crude and malevolent thing on my desk. I must maintain the dignity and self-respect of my staff at all costs. I intend to back up my phone conversation of this morning with a firm letter to St. Cloud." Mr. Green drew himself up like a proud little peacock. "The most important asset we have in this office is our dignity!"

"Yes, sir!" said Peter, who had finished polishing his glasses. "Dignity is a vital factor in effective censorship." He put the glasses on.

Suddenly he dissolved into an involuntary outburst of uncontrollable laughter. He shut his eyes tight.

When he recovered, he opened them cautiously. The movie czar was watching Peter with a bewildered expression on his face, and as Peter once again saw Mr. Green's unadorned figure he started to snort with barely-stifled laughter a second time. This time he managed, before the convulsions were well un-

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der way, to get his glasses off, and Mr. Green's ridiculous shape vanished behind a neatly-tailored suit.

"Sorry, sir," Peter gasped. "I'm—I'm not feeling well this morning." Without waiting for a reply, Peter shouldered past and into his office, leaving his flabbergasted boss standing in the middle of the floor by himself, mouth opening and closing silently.

I'll have to remember to be careful where I look when I wear those things. The sight of Mr. Green abruptly divested of clothing had been too much entirely.

He sat down behind his desk, smiled at his secretary, bony, angular Miss Karp, and reached for the morning's folder.

"There's a lot of work to be done today, Mr. Winston," Miss Karp said cheerfully. "I hope your eyes are good and sharp today. We wouldn't want anything to slip through that shouldn't, you know."

"Of course, Miss Karp," Peter said, only half-listening. Miss Karp was just a part of the office furniture so far as he was concerned, and the fact that she occasionally made wordlike noises did little to raise his opinion of her.

He opened the folder, which listed the films he was to review today and gave some information about the producers, their previous brushes with the Green Office, and similar things. Automatically, he reached for his glasses when he began to read.

The morning's first film was going to be something called *Bad Men On the Loose*, a Western. Oh, well, he thought, that won't be much of a problem. Westerns never are.

"You know, Mr. Winston, I envy you," Miss Karp said suddenly. "You know why?"

"Not at all," Peter said, without looking up from his work. "Why?"

"It's because you get to see all the films free," she said. "You see so many films—you see more in one day than I do in a month. And I have to wait to be asked out," she added.

"I get tired of the routine along toward Wednesday," Peter said. "I can't stand to go to a movie when I have a weekend date." He continued to thumb through the morning's work.

"Mr. Winston?" said Miss Karp, in a coy tone of voice.

"What is it?" Peter asked impatiently, looking up for the first time.

"I thought I'd tell you—" she began, then stopped.

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"Why are you looking at me that way, Mr. Winston?" She glanced down at herself as if something were wrong with her dress.

Peter gasped. It was as if someone had carried off his bony, forbidding-looking secretary and replaced her with one of Hollywood's brightest stars. Just as the flabby body under Mr. Green's dignified exterior had surprised him, even more did the lusciously curved affair that was Miss Karp's chassis astound him. He peered in awe for a moment, then, remembering himself, he turned away and guiltily snatched off the glasses.

"I'm sorry, Miss Karp," he said, covering his confusion. "I'm a little tired this morning, and I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention to what you were saying just now."

"It was nothing, Mr. Winston," she said demurely.

Peter turned back to his work. She was probably trying to angle me into asking her out, he thought. The way she dresses, the poor girl probably gets a date once a month.

He shook his head. It was unbelievable the way that remarkable body was so effectively concealed by the ill-fitting clothes it wore. But the glasses had revealed the true Miss Karp, so to speak, and Peter realized that she could become a mighty desirable item if she wanted to.

Not for him, of course; he had no interest in Miss Karp, even the secret Miss Karp, not while the girl with the birthmark was at large. But he had a certain liking for his secretary, and wanted to see her happy.

He wondered how he could make use of his power to help her, to show her how she was, so to speak, hiding her light under a bushel. He put on the glasses and stealthily took another look at her as she bent busily over her typewriter. Yes, the figure was there, all right. Having confirmed that, he removed the glasses. St. Cloud's Peeping-Tom accusations still rankled him, and he was determined not to make intentional use of the glasses in any way but to find the girl with the birthmark.

He scribbled a little note to himself, and filed it in a special drawer in his desk. At Christmas, he would send Miss Karp—anonymously, of course—a hundred-dollar gift certificate to one of Hollywood's best women's tailors. If that didn't make some change in Miss Karp's ap-

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pearance, he thought, then she was hopeless.

Feeling pleased with himself for having bettered a fellow mortal's lot, Peter picked up his folder and adjourned briskly to the projection room to review the first film of the day.

A new problem confronted him when the picture flashed on the screen. He couldn't see a movie clearly without glasses—but when he put the glasses on, the clothes of the actors disappeared! It was an absurd situation. How was he going to serve his function when he couldn't tell a nude actor from a fully-clad one?

Luckily, the picture was a Western with an all-male cast, and he decided to bluff it through. The movie seemed more than a little silly with none of the cowboys wearing anything, but there didn't seem to be any censorable material in it, and he passed it without comment.

The next film, though, was a different story. It was one of those spectacular Cinema-Scope musicals, in technicolor with stereophonic sound. And as soon as a totally nude chorus line came bounding out to open the picture and burst into song, Peter decided that his efficiency as a censor was almost wholly impaired that morning.

"Hold it," he said, signalling for the lights.

Immediately the producer came bounding up to him. He was a tall, powerful-looking man named Owens, whose pictures were generally just on the safe side, but barely.

"What's this, Winston?" Owens demanded. "There couldn't possibly have been anything censorable so far! What can you object to? The words of that song are as clean as a lot of others I can name, and those girls—"

"Please, Mr. Owens," Peter said. "There's nothing wrong with the film. It's just—just that I'm not feeling well today, and I can't go on with my review. I'll have to send another man in."

Owens' face lost its angry hue and took on an expression of compassion. "Oh—sorry to hear that, Winston. Too bad."

"Thanks," Peter said. "I was looking forward to seeing the film, too. Just for entertainment, you understand."

He made his way out, mumbled some excuse to Mr. Green, and succeeded in getting the rest of the day off. It was just as well, thought Peter. He was useless as a censor without his normal glasses, for one thing, and—

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for another—he was itching to begin his quest. He had a girl to find.

A girl with a birthmark. An interesting girl.

It was getting along toward eleven ayem when Peter got out into the street. The sun was high overhead; it was a warm, pleasant, typical Hollywood morning, with the palm trees waving in the soft breeze. Peter started to walk down the wide street, heading no place in particular.

Where to begin? St. Cloud had filmed *Empty Love* independently, and there was no studio to check for the girl's name. But St. Cloud made most of his films for National-Amalgamated Films, and probably had made *Empty Love* on their lot using N-A personnel. That seemed like the best place to begin the search.

The street was quiet, for Hollywood, with only a few bathing-suited starlets and a few stagehands lugging scenery to be seen, and what seemed like an abnormally small number of Porsches and Jaguars zipping through the streets.

Peter drove over to the N-A lot and parked outside. The guard recognized him and let him in.

"Morning, Mr. Winston," he said.

Peter nodded acknowledgement, then turned in amazement as a long-legged blonde walked past, smiled at the guard, and went out. Hastily Peter whipped out his glasses and trotted out into the street to get a better view. He drew a deep breath—

No. No birthmark. He remained standing there for a moment, in rapt contemplation of the retreating blonde's other noteworthy features, before he finally brought himself to the opinion that it was the wrong girl. He pocketed the precious glasses and returned to the gate.

The guard was smiling. "Pretty nice, eh, Mr. Winston? She's one of our new ones. I could get you her number, if you're interested."

Peter gave him an irritated scowl. "You've got the wrong idea," he said. "I'm not interested in her. She doesn't have a birthmark."

The guard looked at him wide-eyed "She *what*?"

"Doesn't have a birthmark. In the middle of her back. I'm looking for a tall blonde who does."

"I see," the guard said, in a tolerant tone of voice. "I wish you luck," he said, in ob-

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vious puzzlement. Peter didn't stay to explain.

When he got inside, he saw that seven or eight movies were under way, judging from the heaps of scenery all over, the costumed actors jogging from one sound stage to another, and the general busy hum of the whole lot. Peter stopped one tall, bronzed young actor wearing only a blanket and a feather in his hair.

"Say, fellow," Peter said, "can you tell me which way's the Personnel Office?"

"Me not know," the other replied, in sepulchral tones. "Not savvy white man's lingo." Then, catching Peter's astonished glance, he smiled. "Sorry," he said. "Just keeping in the feel of it for the next film I'm in. The Personnel Office is right over there." He pointed to a squat little building crouching in the shade of an immense gleaming spaceship that was being used as a prop for N-A's current space-epic.

"I'm interested in finding one of your starlets," Peter told the middle-aged, dominating-looking woman sitting beside the desk inside. He was glad he wasn't wearing his glasses.

"What for?" she said, in a booming, authoritative voice.

"Official business," he said, flashing his card. She looked at it and glared up at him. Censors are never very popular people. "From the Green Office, eh? Well, what can we do for you?"

"I'm trying to locate a girl I believe works at this studio," Peter explained. Rapidly he described her.

"We have at least twelve who meet the description," she said. "Anything else?"

"This girl has a *birthmark*," Peter said. He told the matron where the birthmark was.

"We don't have anyone here who looks like that," she said coldly. "You'd better try one of the cheaper studios." Her icy visage left no doubt that the interview was at an end.

Outside, standing with one hand propped against the cold metal of the spaceship, Peter surveyed the situation. There were only a couple of million leggy blondes in Hollywood, and he was bound to find the right one eventually if he looked long enough.

He blushed. There was only one way he was ever going to find her.

He put on the glasses.

His first thought was, *Where can I hide?* The sudden appearance of so much un-

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clad femininity in so small a number of square feet was nearly too much for his sensitive soul, but with grim determination he fought down the desire to flee.

He stood rooted to the spot, watching solemnly as National-Amalgamated's roster paraded before him, blissfully unaware that their charms were on full display.

After a while, realizing that he might become conspicuous if he remained in the same place, he began to wander over the lot, peering here and there in the hopes that his mysterious dream-girl would appear. But, though he surveyed countless backs, not one had the required ornamentation.

As he stood on tiptoe to see a distant blonde, he was startled by a voice just behind him.

"Looking for someone, Peter?"

He whirled and saw the owner of the voice. Hastily, he averted his eyes. It was Madge Sinclair, a willowy brunette he had dated occasionally about two years before. They had parted company on somewhat unfriendly terms after Peter had censored completely Madge's big scenes in one of her movies. Censors are never very popular people.

"Hello, Madge," he said glumly, staring carefully to one side of her.

"What are you up to?" she asked. "I've seen you wandering all over for the last ten minutes like some sort of Sherlock Holmes. What's going on?"

"Official business," Peter said.

"Oh. I see." Her voice became harsh. "Still ruining other people's pictures? I thought you'd learned your lesson."

"*Please,* Madge," Peter said.

"What's wrong with you? Why don't you look at me, instead of staring off to one side? You'd think I wasn't wearing anything, or something!"

He said nothing, but made an ineffectual gesture to indicate his embarrassment.

She snorted. "Or, knowing you, you're looking at me as if I *had* clothing on!" she said acidly.

"We've been through this before, Madge," Peter said. "And now—if you don't mind, I would—"

"All right," she said. "I won't take up any more of your precious time. But if you like you can drop over to

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the N-A Beauty Contest this afternoon, you old silly. I'm considered a shoo-in for Queen of the Lot this year."

"Okay, Madge. Fine. I'll—" He broke off suddenly. "I'll see you later," he said, and dashed away, leaving her standing by herself.

Half a hundred running steps brought him up to the object of pursuit. He verified his target by careful observation, and then, half-reluctantly, half-relieved, removed his glasses. This was the girl.

"Pardon me, miss," he said nervously.

She turned.

The face was up to expectations, and then some. Peter felt his heart skip. He was sorely tempted to put the glasses back on, to his own amazement, but he resisted.

"You're Peter Winston, aren't you?" she asked. "From the Green Office?"

She knows me!

"That's right," Peter said. "And you?"

"Joy Harper. I don't think you'll remember any of my films. You probably wouldn't have noticed me. I've had only bit parts up to now."

"Oh, I've seen you, all right. Remember a little thing called *Empty Love*?"

She gasped, turned white and then red, and Peter thought he saw the edge of a tear glistening in one eye. "Oh—that. Oh—*that*," she repeated weakly.

"Yes, that."

"But Mr. St. Cloud swore to me that my scene had been cut out by the censor. I didn't want to do it anyway, but he gave me so much money, and the whole thing was filmed behind a screen, and—and—" She paused, overcome by shame.

"I know," Peter said softly. "I was the censor who cut out the scene. St. Cloud was very angry at me."

"You—oh, thank you!"

"Just doing my job," Peter said. His heart began to thump even harder. They continued to walk along together, and he moved a little closer to her. She didn't seem to mind. They passed the exit gate and were out on the street.

"Where are you heading now?" he asked.

"Nowhere special," she said. "I thought you were leaving, and so I walked out with you. I'm due over on Stage Four in half an hour for the N-A Beauty Contest. It'll mean so much if I win, you know—the winner gets a big starring role and everything, and I'm all keyed up over it."

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Peter nodded. "I'll come watch. And how about afterwards?"

She smiled. "I'll meet you, if you like. But if I'm elected Queen, I'll be way up in the clouds, and if I'm not I won't want to see anyone."

"Maybe I'd be able to cheer you up—if you don't make it, that is."

"Maybe you would—if I don't make it."

"Then it's a date—Joy?"

"All right — Peter." She looked at her wristwatch. "It's getting late. I've got to get into my bathing suit now. See you later?"

"Right!" Peter watched her as she skipped away. She looked as good with her clothes on as she did without them, he reflected.

He stood there for a while, in a pleasant sort of daze, fondling the glasses affectionately. Besides their special abilities, they seemed to inspire him with a strange new sort of dash, of boldness, that he had never had before.

One thing bothered him. The glasses had come from *where*? The—lower regions, the voice had said. And dealing with—*them*—was never a wise policy. Why did they give the glasses to him? What did they have to gain?

"No strings attached," the voice had said. Peter wondered.

He slipped the glasses back into his pocket and strolled across the lot. By now it was past noon, and the sun was almost directly overhead. It was, he thought, a wonderful day, all in all.

Just one thing remained: the beauty contest. A poster directed him to Stage Four, where the contest was being held. He followed the arrows, and after walking through the lot for about five minutes, he came to the place.

The girls were up on the sound stage, with a little knot of judges surveying them avidly and making notes on their scorecards, and an immense horde of spectators watching.

As Peter joined the crowd, he found himself next to the tall actor he had met before.

"How, Big Chief," the actor said. "Get your personnel problem cleared up?"

"I did," Peter said. "Thanks for the help."

"Nothing at all. Me white man's friend. Who do you like for Queen this year?"

"I don't know," Peter said. "I haven't studied the crop. But I hear this girl Joy Harper has a pretty good chance."

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"She's all right," the pseudo-Indian admitted. "But me think Madge Sinclair going to make it. She good-looker."

Peter shook his head. "Madge's all right, but she's a little on the thin side. A little skimpy here and there, if you know what I mean."

"Skimpy? You'd better get your glasses checked, friend," the actor said. "Look at the way that girl's stacked!" He pointed to Madge, strutting proudly before the judges. Her bathing suit was, indeed, magnificently filled.

Peter frowned in puzzlement. He remembered the fleeting glimpse he'd gotten of Madge through the glasses before he'd turned aside, and she hadn't looked quite so—

Why, that's cheating!

He took out the glasses and put them on. After a quick and almost involuntary survey of the entire bevy, he focussed on Madge. He frowned. He had been right the first time.

His heart gave a little jump as Joy came before the judges. She looked, as always, wonderful, but Peter wondered whether Madge's deception would have some effect on the outcome.

It did. The head judge, a small, bald-headed N-A executive, made his way to the front of the platform.

He read off the top five names. Joy was second. "The winner and Queen of the N-A Lot is—Miss Madge Sinclair!"

Through a red haze of anger Peter saw Madge's face go radiant with happiness and saw Joy turn her face away to hide her tears. Somehow, not knowing quite what he was doing, Peter surged forward to the platform and found himself in hot debate with the head judge, who was, at first, infuriated, then incredulous, then annoyed, then interested, finally highly animated with curiosity.

There was a quick huddle of judges called, and, while the audience buzzed, Joy and a mystified Madge were led away inside. When they returned, Madge's face was a bright red with shame, and Peter suspected—though he didn't verify it—that she was blushing all over.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the head judge announced. "I'm sorry to say that there's been—ah—a mistake in the tallying. The actual winner is—Miss Joy Harper!"

He held out the wreath to Joy, whose smile was really something worth recording for posterity.

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A few hours later, when the excitement had died down, Peter had managed to spirit Joy away to one of Hollywood's more secluded niteries.

They were silent for a while, holding hands and staring at each other. Then: "You puzzle me," she said.

"How so?"

"I've got all sorts of questions that need answers, and I don't know what the answers can possibly be."

Peter frowned. "Like what?"

"For one thing, I don't understand how you managed to find me. I saw the rushes of that film I made for St. Cloud, and my face was hidden all the time. The only way you could have told it was me was by my—my birthmark."

"You blush very prettily."

"I'm serious. How did you know who it was? St. Cloud told me he would never reveal who had done that scene."

"It's not easy to explain," Peter said.

"Hold on. There's another thing more important. At that contest today—how did *you* know that Madge wasn't all that she seemed to be? Unless you—"

"I never did!" he said hotly.

"I didn't say you did," she replied. "But how could you have been so positive if—"

He sighed. "I guess I might as well tell you now," he said. He drew out the glasses. "These."

He held them out. "Here. Go into the ladies' room, put them on, and look at yourself in the mirror. Then you'll understand."

Frowning, Joy took the glasses. Peter watched her go. When he turned around, he discovered a suave-looking middle-aged man sitting opposite him at the table.

"I've come for the glasses," he said in a resonant voice that Peter remembered only too well. "They've served their purpose, and belong to you no more."

"Joy has them," Peter said, weakly. "I'll—I'll give them to you when she gets back." His fingers were trembling. Was he here to collect some sort of payment?

"Fair enough," the Other said. "I'll wait."

Peter stared. Finally, he said, "Tell me—what's in this for you and your people? Why'd you give them to me? What's the pitch?"

The Other smiled. "Your worry is unnecessary. We of —Below—are not always evil, you know. Occasionally we may be generous, on a small scale, when it serves our purpose on a larger. Helping one

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individual to find happiness is something we do quite frequently, for bigger reasons."

"What do you mean?" Peter demanded.

"You were a film censor, and a good one. You kept the public from seeing certain things which our group would have liked shown. Therefore, we took steps to remove you from your position. But we saw no reason to be cruel to you in the process."

"Remove me from my position?"

"Of course. In two hours, you will phone Green and tell him you have resigned from his Office to return to movie acting, and you will become a successful actor. Your first vehicle will be a starring role opposite your wife Joy. All this will take place."

Peter was astonished. "But —how did you know I was planning to resign—"

"With ease," the other said. "You became a censor out of frustration, though you may not realize it consciously. But now, with the source of frustration removed, you no longer have any need to practice your trade. You now find the idea of censorship repugnant. Correct?"

Peter nodded, dazed. So he had been a tool of the Dark Powers all along? Was what he had done right, or wrong? He was totally confused.

Then he smiled. The Devil had won his point; he had made Peter happy, and rid the world of one of its finest censors. Fine; *too bad for the world,* Peter thought. Who am I to argue?

He looked up and saw Joy returning with the glasses. She was utterly amazed. "Of all the incredible—where'd you get them?" she demanded. "And how long did you spy around with them?"

"This gentleman gave them to me, dear. He's—ah—a scientist. And I used them only when necessary to find a certain girl with a certain birthmark who I couldn't find any other way."

The dark gentleman reached out a hand. "I'll take these now, please."

Joy handed them over. "Here you are, and welcome to them. I don't think Peter's going to be needing them any more."

"I doubt it," Peter said, leaning over the table to kiss her, and not even noticing as the dark gentleman suavely vanished into the air.

THE END

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ALL GOOD MEN

By MILTON LESSER

Steve Marstow was a writer. He created characters out of thin air. And that brings up a question: Just how thin is thin air? Evidently it's made of pretty durable stuff because Steve's heroes and villains refused to stay on a printed page. The heroes didn't cause much trouble. But a certain villain took things too seriously.

"THAT won't solve your problem," Sandy said.

"O.K., then. The hell with it," Steve Marstow told his wife. He finished what was left of his Canadian highball and added, "We might as well go to bed."

"Sure. Only you'll be tossing and turning all night trying to figure out how to get Cliff Savage, private detective, out of the pickle you put him in."

"I've got to. The deadline's next week."

"I still like the title," Sandy said stubbornly. " 'You'll Die Forever'."

"A lot of good the title does me."

"See? That's what I mean. You're pressing too hard. Why don't you try my theory?"

"You're not a mystery writer, honey."

"It still seems like a good idea to me," Sandy said. "Forget about 'You'll Die Forever' as a sixty-thousand-word novel. Forget about Cliff Savage as a character you dreamed up. Make believe he's real. Just sit down at the typewriter and sort of let him take over."

"Well, maybe I'll try it," Marstow said. "In the morning."

"What's Cliff's trouble now, anyway?" Sandy asked as they went upstairs together.

"The poor slob has had it," Marstow said with a grin. "I piled on so many complications, Houdini wouldn't be able to get out. Cliff found out the identity of the killer, see? But the killer wasn't exactly

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He had enjoyed their company. Now, they refused to go home. 67

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a dodo, either. He found out Cliff found out. His boys took Cliff for a ride and dumped him into Lower New York Bay from a deserted dead-end street in Brooklyn."

"So, he's a good swimmer. What's so hard about that?"

"He's wearing an overcoat."

"He can take it off."

"A cement overcoat, courtesy of the killer."

"Poor Cliff," Sandy giggled.

"Very funny."

"Well, I'm sorry, Steve. But it does strike me as funny. In your six hard-boiled Cliff Savage books you've really put that guy through the wringer, haven't you? He's been wounded so many times, if you undressed him he'd look like a Swiss cheese. He's been bopped over the head so much a phrenologist wouldn't know where to get started. He's been made love to by so many nymphomaniacs he probably screams every time he sees a pretty girl. But he's done all right by us, hasn't he? We live in a twenty-five-thousand-dollar house in an exclusive suburb, we own two cars and have no outstanding debts. So what have you done to Cliff? He still lives in a one-and a-half-room bachelor efficiency apartment in the undesirable section of Greenwich Village, has no money in the bank and no prospects of a happy family life."

"That's a funny way to talk," Marstow said as he shut the bedroom light. "You're talking almost as if you think Cliff Savage is real."

"Well, how do you feel about him? You created him, didn't you?"

"I never think of him as a flesh and blood person. Nobody could be as tough as our Cliff. Nobody's dialogue could be so consistently sharp. Nobody could have all that intuition."

"And nobody," Sandy said sleepily, "would be such a glutton for punishment. Well, goodnight, honey."

"Goodnight," Steve Marstow said. He did not feel sleepy. He knew he would not sleep. He never slept well when Cliff Savage was embroiled in a big one. This was big, all right. Cliff was on the trail of the boss of the Mafia. He never slept at all when Cliff's problems temporarily defied solution. Temporarily? Marstow shuddered. What if it were permanent? What if he couldn't get Savage out of the jam he'd created? Was it symptomatic of something else? Of the spring running dry? He had heard of writers like that, writing great guns

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all their lives and suddenly for no apparent reason going dry. He turned over on his side and tried to concentrate on Cliff and his problem. Much to his own surprise, he drifted off to troubled sleep.

"Steve! Hey, Steve, get up."

"Canchalemesleep?"

"Sh! Be quiet. Someone's in the house," Sandy said in a tight, nervous whisper.

"What did you say?"

"There's a prowler in the house. Downstairs, honey. I'm scared."

"Probably your imagination," Steve Marstow said somewhat irritably. He knew he would not get back to sleep tonight.

"No. Listen."

He heard it then, the sound of stealthy footsteps, then a pause, then more footsteps, then the squeak of the swivel chair in his study. Someone was in the house, there wasn't any doubt about that.

"Well, don't just sit there," Sandy pleaded.

"I'm not like Cliff Savage. I don't have an arsenal at my bedside."

"You mean you're just going to let him ransack our house? Steve Marstow, I'd be ashamed of you for as long as we live."

"I didn't say that," Marstow said, very unsure of himself. He climbed off the bed with exaggerated care and tripped on his shoes, stumbling across the bedroom in an agonizing dance until he regained his balance.

"Be quiet!" Sandy whispered.

"I'll go down and confront him," Marstow announced reluctantly. "I'll shut the door behind me so you can call the police. And tell them, for crying out loud, run, don't walk."

Sandy squeezed his hand, then he padded barefoot across the room and through the doorway. He shut the door without a sound and waited for a few seconds until he heard faintly the dialing of the telephone. He did not think the prowler would hear it downstairs. The prowler was probably too busy deciding what was worth taking. He reached the head of the stairs and went down slowly, with supreme care, testing each step for creaks before he put his weight on it.

When he neared the study door he saw that it was open halfway. The prowler, whoever he was, was as cool as ice water. He actually had the nerve to put a light on in the study. It was not a flashlight. It was Marstow's own desk lamp. Marstow tip-toed to the

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door and listened. He wished suddenly for a weapon, any kind of weapon. Even a baseball bat would do. He had nothing but his hands. Then he shrugged: he had read somewhere that most prowlers were unarmed and were more frightened than their victims. Act a little tough and they'd probably go howling off into the night. He heard the faint dry rustle of papers in the study. Behind him, the house was pitch black.

He took a deep breath, pushed the door in all the way and saw a figure huddled over the stack of yellow manila paper on his desk. "All right, you!" Marstow said abruptly.

The figure whirled, his hand flashing out and plunging the room into darkness. Marstow felt his heart hammering. He could see and hear absolutely nothing. It was as if the shutting of the desk lamp had made the world stand still.

Suddenly something brushed against him. A fist tightened on the jacket of his pajamas, bunching the fabric until Marstow felt it rip. "If you open your mouth," the prowler promised in a soft voice, "I'll cram your tonsils down your throat. If you have anything to say, just you whisper it, Jack."

"What do you want?" Marstow managed.

Instead of answering, the unseen prowler said, "Old lady call the police?"

"Yes," Marstow said, his confidence returning. "Of course she called them. You probably don't have more than five minutes in which to get out of here. You can leave by the front door, but I'll insist on searching you first to see what you've taken."

The prowler chuckled. "If you're not the be-all and end-all," he said.

Marstow heard himself gasping. "What did you say?" he asked.

"You heard what I said."

"Who . . . who are you? You must read my books. That's what Cliff Savage always says when he's disgusted with someone, 'if you're not the be-all and end-all'."

"So? If you think you won't get heart failure, I'll put on the light."

"Heart failure?" Marstow mumbled vaguely. "Put it on. Go ahead and put on the light."

The fist left his pajama jacket. Marstow was vaguely aware of someone walking across the room. Then the recessed overhead lighting went on.

Marstow's study was a

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large room in a corner of the house. Ten feet of each wall, meeting at the corner, was solid tinted thermopane. On either side of the pale blue glass the walls were lined with bookshelves. Marstow's large desk, which was teakwood and glass and very expensive, had been a gift from Sandy on his twenty-eighth birthday last year. On the desk was Marstow's electric typewriter, the remains of a ream of yellow paper and the first hundred and ninety pages of "You'll Die Forever."

Marstow knew the man who turned around and faced him with a slow smile spreading across his face. But Marstow had never seen him before.

He was a big fellow with brush-cut blonde hair and enormous shoulders. He was wearing a charcoal gray suit. He was at least six feet two inches tall and had a rugged, handsome face. There was a knife scar on the left side of his neck. A girl had stabbed him there. It had happened in "Tomorrow the Hangman," the second Cliff Savage book. Marstow had written it.

The man who faced him across the high-pile twist rug of his study was Cliff Savage.

"That's impossible and you know it," Marstow said.

"Then what am I doing here?"

"It's some kind of trick. It has to be a trick. Did my publisher put you up to this? When I get hold of E. P. Dursten . . ."

"Nobody put me up to it, Jack."

"Stop calling me Jack."

"That's what I always call the wise guys in your books. Isn't it?"

"I guess it is. All right, I'll bite. What's the gag?" Marstow licked his lips nervously.

"No gag. I'm Cliff Savage. You said so yourself."

"And I'm Superman. Better watch your step because under these pajamas I'm wearing my blue uniform and red cape."

"Don't bother with it, Jack. On you it sounds like hell."

"What sounds like hell?"

"Sharp dialogue. You've got to have the voice for it. I have the voice for it, but you ought to know that. You made me the voice for it."

"Listen here," Marstow said, then laughed nervously. "Are you trying to tell me you're Cliff Savage, the shamus?"

"Don't call me shamus. *You* ought to know better than that. Only the punks call me shamus in your books."

"That's true," Marstow ad-

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mitted. "But are you trying to tell me you're Cliff Savage?"

"Of course I'm Cliff Savage. Who the hell else do you think I am?"

"You can't be Cliff Savage. I created Cliff Savage."

"Well, I ought to be grateful for that, I guess. If you didn't keep getting me in so much hot water."

"No, what I mean is I created Cliff Savage and so he has no existence outside the pages of my books. You couldn't possibly be Cliff Savage."

"Wise up, Jack. You think I'm the only fictional character who came back to bother his creator? Who do you think killed Ambrose Bierce? Why do you think everyone said William Blake, the English poet, was nuts? I'll tell you why. Because he imagined he lived in the company of his own created characters."

"Then I'm going crazy?"

"Like hell you're going crazy. Blake wasn't nuts. They really came and visited him. We don't usually do that sort of thing."

"Who's we?"

"Oh, sorry. Why, fictional characters of course. Every time a writer creates somebody, something in the fabric of the space-time continuum goes snap and there he is. That's the only way I can explain it to you, Jack. Why don't you create a physicist some time? He'd be able to give you the real lowdown."

"You said there he is. You mean the fictional character? Where? Where is he when something goes, uh, snap?"

"The place where we live. It's kind of a parallel world and it's a cockeyed place, too, but we like it. It's cockeyed because it's mixed up, sort of. You see, all the backgrounds of all the books ever written come together there and form one completely logical but also completely haywire environment. Once you get to know the place, though, you like it. It's all right, Jack. But I'm one of the unlucky ones."

"Why are you one of the unlucky ones?" Marstow wanted to know. Of course he did not believe a word of it, but Cliff Savage, if it was Cliff Savage, certainly told a convincing story.

"Because I'm a series character, that's why. The others, they got it made, Jack. They're used once, in one book, and that's it. They can spend the rest of their lives enjoying themselves in that parallel world I was telling you about. But not this boy. You had to go and be a series writer. Every time I'm getting set

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over there, you yank me out and put me through my paces in another book. I can't even own a home of my own in the parallel world. Too unsettled. Too dangerous. They won't give me a mortgage. I can't get married, either. What sensible dame would have me under these conditions? For no fault of my own, they all regard me as an irresponsible ne'er-do-well."

"And you're trying to say it's my fault?"

"Damn right it's your fault. Why don't you retire me in the next book? Hell, you don't want me to go on supporting you forever, do you?"

"My wife and I don't think it's such a bad idea."

"See? See what I mean? You have a wife. You're a pillar of the community, Jack. How does the contrast look to you?"

"Is that why you came to see me?"

"You think I'm a cry baby? I didn't come to see you about that but I figured I ought to get in the gripe while I was here."

"Then what do you want?"

Cliff Savage paced back and forth the way he always did in Marstow's books. He had a thoughtful look on his craggy face, as if he could do some hard thinking when the occasion demanded but did not like to strain himself cerebrally. It was the way Marstow had written it. The more Marstow saw of the prowler, the more he was inclined to believe the incredible story, incredible or not.

"I'll tell you why I'm here," Savage said finally. "It's that latest story of yours, Jack. 'You'll Die Forever.' Have a heart, will you?"

"What do you mean, have a heart?"

"I get my lumps in the story. That's O.K., I'm used to it and I guess you know what kind of story sells copies by now. But that climax, Jack. For crying out loud, I'm only human. Hell, I'm not even human by your standards. I'm only fictional. I'm a series character and I don't like it but I've got to live with it. Just when I settle down in the parallel world and start enjoying life, you yank me back here for another book. I'll buy that. I have to. But what do you think happens when you can't figure your way out of a tight spot?"

"I'm sorry but I have to admit I don't know."

"I'll tell you. I stay there. I stay right there until you dope it out. Let me remind you."

"You don't have to remind me," Marstow gulped.

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"I want to, Jack. I'm at the bottom of the river. Almost at the bottom. I'm sinking. I'm wearing a cement overcoat. If you let that go on much longer, Marstow, you're not a human being!" Cliff Savage spoke now with sudden passion. It was the first time in their short acquaintance that he seemed out of character to Marstow.

"You mean you keep drowning and drowning?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Figure a way out of it, will you? You'll give me a nervous breakdown. Look. Look at it this way. I'm home in my parallel world. I'm not the happiest guy there because I'm a series character and may be called back to active duty any day, almost without warning, but I get by. But now this. Every day for a few minutes I find myself down there again. Maybe it's not really drowning, but it feels just like drowning. I suffer, Jack."

"What happens if I decide to kill you off?" Marstow said with sudden enthusiasm.

"Don't be morbid. We got cemeteries over there, but I'm not ready to cash in." Savage took an ominous step forward. "I'd kill you first. Try me if you don't believe me."

"I was just joking," Marstow said with a shudder. "I couldn't kill you if I wanted to. You're my bread and butter, we both know that. And believe me, if I could figure a way out of the current jam I'd do it. How do you think I feel?"

"How do you think *I* feel?"

"Well, have you any suggestions?"

Savage jerked his head from side to side. "Against the law," he said. "I can't give you any suggestions. Don't ask me why, but we have our own code of ethics. I'll tell you this, though. You'd better think of something fast. And you better make hay while the sun shines, as the expression goes. Because we're unionizing."

"Who's unionizing?"

"Series characters, Jack. Including the radio and TV, you know how many of us there are? It will surprise you. There are over four hundred and fifty series characters and we're drawing up the union charter right now. We'll get our rights. For one thing, we want to be limited to one book every two years."

"How can you enforce your demands?"

"Are you kidding? By haunting you. I didn't have to reveal myself. I didn't have to say who I was. I could have

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haunted you like a ghost. I could have driven you nuts. Couldn't I?"

"I guess so," Marstow admitted.

Just then, there was the sound of a car door slamming outside. Footsteps pounded along the sidewalk and up the flagstone walk. There was a peremptory knock on the door and a voice said, "This is the police. Open up!"

"Thank heaven," Sandy's voice drifted down from upstairs.

Cliff Savage looked at his creator accusingly. "You forgot all about calling the police. What are we going to do now? Just get one thing straight, Jack; you've put me in enough flea-bag jails in your books. I'm not going to jail for you tonight. You got it?"

Marstow nodded and went to the door. Two patrolmen stood there with their Police Special .38 revolvers ready. "Trouble, Mr. Marstow?" the burlier of the two demanded. "The wife called and said there was a prowler."

"I know," Marstow said, stalling for time.

"Was there?" the second cop said.

"Well, yes and no," Marstow said.

Savage poked him in the kidneys with an elbow.

"That is, I thought there was and my wife thought there was but there wasn't. You see?"

"Who's that behind you?"

"My cousin Stanley Smith," Marstow said with sudden inspiration. "My wife's cousin, actually. The Smiths are on her mother's side, you see. We didn't expect old Stan until tomorrow, so when he showed up tonight and let himself in with the key we had mailed him, we naturally assumed it was a prowler."

"The key you had mailed him?"

"We always mail our house guests keys in case we're not home. That's all there is to it, sergeant. Well, good night. I'm sorry we troubled you."

The two cops nodded and touched fingertips to the visors of their caps. They looked doubtfully at one another as if to say, yes, we understand all about you, Mr. Marstow. You're a nice guy but I guess writers are peculiar people, which is why they're writers in the first place.

After the police car growled off into the night, Sandy came running downstairs. "I was so afraid," she said. "I didn't know what you were doing here all this time. I was too scared to come down and

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see. I—" Suddenly she saw Savage and screamed.

"It's all right," Marstow said.

"It's all right? But . . . but the prowler's still here."

"There was no prowler. This is Cliff Savage."

"You're drunk," Sandy said accusingly. Then Savage stepped out into the light where she could see him clearly. She had read and proofread all of her husband's books. She had seen the pictures of Cliff Savage on the dust jackets. She knew exactly what he was supposed to look like. She screamed again and fainted into Marstow's arms.

"She'll be all right," Savage said as Marstow carried her to his large leather reading chair and placed her down there.

"I'll get her some water."

"First listen to me. Take the last twenty pages of 'You'll Die Forever'. Get rid of them. Write them all over again, without the cement overcoat and the ride and the dunking in Lower New York Bay Tony Saffel's Black Hand boys give me. You can still make a good book out of it? What do you say?"

Sudden unexpected compassion overwhelmed Marstow. He felt a deep sorrow for his suffering brainchild. He said, "I'll think about it. Maybe I'll do what you say. Maybe I'll get rid of that whole last section of the book and—"

"Now you're talking."

"—and—I know! You got to Saffel's Club Fourteen in Manhattan. You bluff your way by the goons and gorillas he keeps there. You confront Saffel with the evidence in his own sanctum sanctorum. You beat the hell out of him and call the cops. How does that sound?"

Cliff Savage beamed from ear to ear. "Wonderful," he said. "Saffel's had it coming to him for a long time. A Mafia boss terrorizing a city of eight million people in this day and age," Savage said moralistically, "something like that's got to come to an end. Do you realize Saffel's been your series villain just like I've been your series hero? Six books, six Savages, six Saffels. And I've never caught the guy, either. Jack, I wouldn't mind being a series character the rest of my life if you just let me give Saffel what's coming to him in this book. I won't even join the union. What do you say, Steve?"

"I'll do it," Marstow said solemnly. "I'll do it, Cliff. That's a promise. Go on home. You can rest easy, pal, be-

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cause I'll do it. And get rid of those pages with the cement jacket, too."

"You're O.K., Steve," Cliff said almost shyly.

They shook hands. "Well, so long," Cliff said. "So long, Steve. I'm glad I finally met the man who created me."

"Good-by, Cliff. Good luck to you."

"That's up to you, Jack," Cliff said, grinning. "Whether my luck is good or bad."

Marstow blinked his eyes. Cliff Savage grew smaller and smaller. When he was very small indeed he hopped nimbly up to the typewriter and in among the keys. Marstow bent over the typewriter and squinted into it but could not see the private detective anywhere.

He went back to Sandy and chafed her wrists. He brought her water and held it to her lips. He hardly knew what he was doing. All he could see in his mind's eye was Cliff Savage growing smaller and smaller and finally disappearing into the typewriter which had created him, and from there, Marstow guessed, into the parallel world about which he'd spoken.

When Sandy regained consciousness, she said nothing about Cliff Savage and nothing about the prowler. "What are we doing down here at this hour?" she asked Marstow sleepily.

He mumbled something which satisfied her and they went upstairs together. He couldn't help thinking of the English poet William Blake, who had been visited regularly by his creations.

People had thought Blake was stark raving mad.

Marstow shuddered and went to sleep. Crazy or not, he thought as he drifted off, in the morning he would destroy the final uncompleted section of "You'll Die Forever" as he had promised Cliff Savage.

He awoke feeling rested and refreshed. Bright sunshine streamed in cheerfully through the window. It was going to be a fine autumn day, a good day for writing. He'd throw open the windows and down the block they would be burning the leaves and if it grew cold in the late afternoon he might even light the first fire of the autumn.

"Sandy," he called. "Good morning, honey."

There was no answer.

At first he thought nothing of it. He did not hear the shower running, so he assumed Sandy was downstairs getting breakfast. He stripped

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off his pajamas, washed and dressed and went downstairs. On his way to the kitchen he opened the front door and found the morning newspaper. The world was normal these days. Very normal. After two decades of trouble it was so unexpected that strange things had to happen somewhere. Not happening in the world at large, they happened in his own private world.

Or in his mind.

He wondered about last night. Imagination? Mild form of hallucination? Surely, he couldn't believe it had really happened.

"Sandy," he called cheerfully, and headed for the kitchen.

He did not smell anything cooking. The kitchen was empty. The stove was cold. It was so unlike Sandy that he suddenly became alarmed. "Sandy!" he shouted, and began to explore the house.

He didn't find her anywhere inside, nor outside getting in some raking before breakfast. The last place he looked was in the study. The cover was off his electric typewriter. A sheet of paper was inserted in the roller although he had not remembered leaving one in yesterday. Something was typed on it. He read:

If you ever want to see your wife alive again don't destroy the final pages of You'll Die Forever. *That snooping peeper Cliff Savage deserves everything he gets. If you think this is a joke you'd better at least wait until we contact you if you love your wife.*

The brief note was signed SAFFEL. Below the signature was the imprint of a black hand, the way Saffel always signed his ominous letters in Marstow's books. Saffel, the leader of the Mafia. The Black Hand. Saffel had Sandy.

If Cliff Savage's visit had been real last night, Marstow thought with mounting despair, why not Saffel's too? Saffel was a series character just as Cliff Savage was. But Saffel was evil incarnate. That had been the whole idea. He was a tough villain who seemed a match and at times more than a match for Marstow's private detective hero.

He was certainly more than a match for Marstow himself.

Maybe I ought to call the police, Marstow found himself thinking. He rejected the idea immediately. Call the police? Yeah, sure. Hello, there, sergeant. Ever read my books? You know Saffel, my chief villain? Boss of the

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Mafia? Yeah, that's the one. Some time in the wee hours of the morning he came here and kidnapped my wife. You see, there's an argument between him and my fictional hero about the outcome of my latest book and . . .

He could just see that happening. He shook his head and lit a cigarette. It tasted very strong on his empty stomach and he ground it out in an ashtray. Then what?

Immediately write a scene killing off Saffel?

But the note said he couldn't destroy the other unfinished ending of "You'll Die Forever," and a book certainly couldn't have two endings, could it?

He sat down at the typewriter and began to write furiously. The hell a book couldn't have two endings, he told himself as the keys fairly flew. This one would, at least in first draft. He began to write the scene as he had told it to Cliff Savage, real or imaginary, last night. Savage took a cab to Saffel's Club Fourteen on Fifty-second Street. He paid off the driver grimly and gave him a big tip. He could afford a big tip: it might be the last one he ever gave. Inside the Club Fourteen he bluffed Saffel's gorillas and made his way into the Mafia boss' private office.

"What the hell do you want?" Saffel demanded.

"It's been a long time, Saffel," Cliff said. "Too long. The ghosts are finally catching up with you. Aren't they?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Saffel sneered. He had poise and composure. He was wearing a midnight blue tuxedo which fit him well. He was a big man, as big as Cliff himself. He looked strong and capable. He was handsome. Cliff thought. The ladies would find him devastatingly attractive.

"Don't you?" Cliff said. His voice was a soft purr, now, a dangerous purr.

"Not me, peeper."

"You killed Moretti. I've got the proof right in my pocket. I've also got proof that you boss the Mafia."

"Yeah?" said Saffel, gazing at his fingernails. "What kind of proof?"

"The kind that could send you through the little green door, Jack."

"I'm listening."

"When you left Moretti down on the docks, you thought he was dead. He wasn't dead yet. He wrote it all out for me before he

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died. You're all washed up, Saffel."

Saffel's face suddenly drained of color. He leaned down on the cordovan leather top of his desk with both hands and did not say anything. He was watching Cliff as if his life depended on it. "You're lying," he said softly. "Moretti was dead."

"He's dead now. He wasn't dead when you left him."

Saffel's hand blurred toward the desk drawer. Cliff launched himself across the top of the desk and drove the tuxedo-clad figure back across the room. For Moretti, he thought. For Moretti and all the others. Saffel yelled and someone pounded on the door. It didn't matter. The door was locked. It was three-inch steel plate and no one would get in until Saffel got what was coming to him. . . .

"Cut it out, Marstow," a voice said suddenly. "Get your hands off that typewriter. Don't type another word if you want to see your wife alive. You get me?"

Marstow whirled around, sending the stack of yellow paper flying. A man in a tuxedo stood watching him, a faint sneer tugging at the corners of his mouth. He had poise and composure. The midnight blue tuxedo fit him well. He was a big man, as big as Cliff Savage. He looked strong and capable. He was handsome. The ladies would find him devastatingly attractive.

His name, of course, was Saffel.

"I thought you might try a stunt like this," Saffel said. "I guess you thought I was playing games. Let me warn you, Marstow. I'm not playing games. I've got your wife where you can't get to her. The whole United States Army couldn't get her where I've put her. You think I'm kidding?"

"I don't know what to think," Marstow groaned.

"Then let me do your thinking for you. I'll give you a chance, Marstow. One chance to get your wife back. Get rid of Savage. Kill the lousy peeper off in 'You'll Die Forever.' He's been in my hair long enough. Hell, man, you think he's your big drawing card? Well, he's not. I am. Me, Saffel. Me and the Mafia. It's what your readers want. Unconsciously you must have known it all along. It's why you haven't had that stinking shamus kill me off in one of the first six books in the

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series. I'm your real protagonist. Don't you know that by now?"

"You're crazy, Saffel. You can't get away with this."

"O.K.," Saffel shrugged. "You don't have to agree with me. Just do like I say. If you don't, just say good-bye to the little woman. Well, which is it going to be?"

Marstow cursed savagely and leaped across the room. Saffel met him halfway and parried his wild right fist, then drove his own left to the writer's belly and crossed his right to Marstow's jaw. Marstow went down and stayed down, sobbing, trying to suck air into his lungs.

"Sucker," Saffel said, brushing himself off. "What's the matter with you? You ought to know you wouldn't have a chance fighting with me. You created me so I'd be a match for Cliff Savage. You think you're in our league? You actually believe that?"

"No. I guess not."

"Well, remember it next time."

"Where's my wife?"

"The beauty part of it is," Saffel confided, "I can tell you and there's still nothing you can do about it. You see, we fictional characters live in a kind of parallel world, like interlocking bubbles and—"

"I know. Savage explained all that to me."

"You don't say? I didn't think he had the brains."

"That's where you have my wife?"

"Yeah. Only fictional characters can go there. So you see what I mean, you've got to play ball. And listen, wise guy. Don't waste your time with any foolish notions. You can't write up a squad of commandos to come after me, see? It doesn't work that way."

"What doesn't work that way?"

"Just any kind of fictional characters can't come into our parallel world. It's what you might call exclusive. Characters created out of personal spite or for personal reasons and not for real stories can't enter. They're not real fictional characters and something about the physics of our world excludes them. Hell, Marstow, don't even bother trying."

"I—I wasn't thinking of that."

"Wise up. You don't have a chance. Will you write it the way I say?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I won't bother you now. But I'll be watching you. And you better give me that junk about how Savage busted into my place and beat the hell out of me."

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Wordlessly, Marstow gave him the pages of typescript. He watched Saffel hold a match to them, watched the flames curl up and destroy the half a dozen pages he had written. Saffel dropped the final cinder into a large ashtray and said, "Remember, I'll be watching you."

He grew smaller, the way Cliff Savage had done the night before. Marstow waited until he was very small and then leaped for him. Yelling in a shrill faint voice, the tiny Saffel scurried up a leg of the desk like an insect. If I can get him now, Marstow thought. If I can catch him now and hold him . . .

Saffel eluded his outstretched hands. Saffel sprinted across the desktop toward the typewriter. He picked up a paper knife and whirled, using it like a sword. He slashed it across Marstow's hand, drawing blood. Involuntarily, Marstow jerked his hand back. Saffel jumped up the keyboard and into the typewriter.

He disappeared.

Marstow sat there smoking a cigarette. He looked bleakly at the typewriter and wondered if he would ever write another word. Some suspense story writer, he thought. You've made Cliff Savage fight his way in and out of half a dozen books but you can't do it yourself. It's your wife. It's your own wife Saffel's got . . .

He grinned suddenly. It was a hopeful grin and if Saffel was indeed watching him then Saffel might become suspicious. With an effort he made his face appear very sober and inserted a sheet of paper in the typewriter. He thought back to "All the Girls Were Dying," his first Cliff Savage novel. Cliff and his pretty secretary Wanda had developed a private code in that book. When Cliff couldn't contact Wanda any other way, he could always get in touch with her by code. The readers hadn't liked the gimmick and Marstow had abandoned it after the first book. He wondered if Cliff still remembered it.

He had to remember it. . . .

Marstow typed: *Fellyk oiu ku eite kp elct oebiuutk eicdk. Tws kiw!* (Saffel has my wife in your parallel world. Get her!)

He waited. He smoked another cigarette. He did not know if the coded message would bring Cliff Savage. He half expected Saffel would return because of it.

All at once the room was filled with a cloying perfume.

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Marstow had never smelled anything like it, but he had read about it, and the place he had read it was his own books. It was a perfume of Java and Borneo, a rare, exotic, provocative perfume which, as far as Marstow knew, and in this case Marstow knew everything, had been obtained for Cliff Savage's secretary Wanda by Savage on one of his business trips.

Marstow blinked. A soft hand rested on his shoulder. He turned around and gazed into the violet eyes of Wanda Wilder, Cliff's secretary. She was a tall redhead with a beautiful face and the kind of figure you only see in pin-up pictures or read about in private eye novels. She wore a tight sheath of a dress. Sheath? It fit her more like a scabbard fit a sword. Marstow smiled. He must remember that line: it was a good one.

"Well, Mr. Marstow," Wanda said in her throaty, never-heard but well-known voice, "I always wanted to meet you. You know it?"

"I didn't know it."

"Well, it's the truth. I got your code message. Cliffy isn't around."

"Don't call him Cliffy. I never had you call him Cliffy. It's out of character."

"I can call him anything I want when you're not writing me," Wanda said, her beautiful eyes flashing fire. "Don't you tell me what to call my Cliffy."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to argue with you. It's my wife. You see—"

"I know all about it. I know where Saffel's got her. Cliffy put me on it, you see."

"He did? Then he knows?"

"Sure, but what can he do about it?" Wanda said. "As soon as you sit down at the typewriter and continue with your Cliff Savage novels, back he goes into his cement jacket under Lower New York Bay. Of course, honey, if you destroyed those pages . . ."

"But I can't. Saffel has my wife. That's exactly what he doesn't want me to do."

"Then Cliff can't help you."

"What about you, Wanda? Can you help me?"

"It would be out of character for me. Wouldn't it? I thought I was a sexy but otherwise delicate female."

"That's true," Marstow groaned. "But couldn't I change you?"

"You better not. Cliffy likes me just the way I am. If you change me and then we series characters get our union. . ."

"All right, all right. Let me think."

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"Look, Mr. Marstow. Look, Stevie boy. There's only one person who can help your wife. You know who that is? It's you. You're the only one."

"But I can't get in there. I'm not fictional. I . . . oh, I see," Marstow brightened. "You mean I can write my wife out of there."

"No, silly. She's not a fictional character, so you can't write her any place. But you can write yourself in."

"But I'm not fictional."

"There's a way, if you have the guts."

"I love my wife, Wanda. Of course I have the guts. I'd do anything for her."

"Including facing Saffel and having it out with him?"

"Why yes, yes of course. But why," Marstow asked with sudden suspicion, "are you so interested? I know what kind of girl I made you, Wanda. What's in it for you? And don't lie to me. I'll know if you're lying to me."

"I guess you would, at that. Very well, I'll tell you. When you created Saffel and Cliffy, you made sure they'd go on and on as series antagonists. Don't you remember?"

"I don't follow you. Please get to the point."

"They're exactly evenly matched. They can't kill or successfully capture each other. It would be out of character. You made sure of that. So even though Cliffy came here and tried to get you to polish off Saffel, it wouldn't have worked. The only one who can polish off Saffel is yourself."

"By writing him off?"

"No, silly. How many times do I have to tell you? In the flesh. Well, are you ready to go after him?"

"Yes, I guess so. But how?"

"Sit down at the typewriter."

Marstow did so. "Now what?" he said. "Just write myself into the parallel world?"

"It wouldn't work. But there's a cabal for it. If you know the cabal."

"Do you know it?"

"Of course I do." And Wanda recited some words to him, then said: "Go ahead and type that."

"But that's just a typing exercise."

"Are you asking me or telling me? Just type it. You're a good guy, aren't you? You have a legitimate motive to go there, haven't you? It will work. Just type what I told you."

Doubtfully, Marstow typed.

He grew smaller.

Incredulously, he clambered up the leg of the desk, across

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the surface of the desk, scurried into the typewriter. . . .

It was a large room, furnished in ultra-modern style with a kidney-shaped sofa and amorphous carpet-strips and a cocktail table of solid glass and mobiles hanging from the ceiling. It was the sort of room Saffel would like. Marstow knew this at once because he had created everything about Saffel. He stood there in the center of the room and knew without being told that he had written himself into the parallel world of fictional characters simply by typing the typewriter exercise Wanda had mentioned to him. He probed his brain now to find some weakness in Saffel's makeup. He shuddered. He could find none. Saffel was a worthy antagonist for Cliff Savage. He had to be, to last through half a dozen violent novels of murder and suspense. He had no weaknesses. Marstow had given him none.

Abruptly a door opened alongside the kidney-shaped sofa. Saffel entered the room with Marstow's wife. Saffel was smiling and went right on smiling when he saw Marstow. "I don't know how you got here," he said, "but I have to hand it to you. Still, it won't do you any good, you know."

"Sandy!" Marstow cried. "Are you all right? Has he hurt you?"

"No, honey. I'm all right. But I—I don't know where I am or who—I ought to know this man, you see. I should be able to place him but I . . . Steve, I'm afraid . . ."

"Don't even try to think about it," Marstow said. "I'll get you out of here."

Saffel smiled at him. "Yes? How?"

"Are we alone?"

"You ought to know we're alone. I'd be out of character otherwise. I don't like to live with anyone. I don't like crowds. I don't like families. I don't even like servants. We're quite alone."

"Good," Marstow said. "Now, before I beat you to a pulp—" he began.

"You beat me to a pulp!" Saffel said, roaring his laughter. "That's a good one. Not after you made me so tough, pal."

"I wrote myself even tougher," Marstow lied. Actually, he had been able to write himself no way at all. "I can knock the stuffings out of you now."

Saffel stopped smiling but said, "You can go ahead and try." He probably believed

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Marstow, but Marstow had made him brave. He was not at all craven. "I'm unarmed," he added, waiting for Marstow to attack him. "I can't use firearms here because that would attract attention and I have your wife here illegally."

Marstow stood there and watched him. Sandy said nothing. She looked puzzled. Marstow thought that if they ever returned home she would forget again, as she had forgotten after Cliff Savage's visit. Saffel said, "O.K., pal. I'm waiting for you."

Marstow turned pale. He had wanted to bluff the bigger man. He didn't have a chance against him. The bluff had failed, had failed miserably. What could he do now?

Saffel didn't give him a chance to figure it out. Saffel charged at him and sent him sprawling with a sharp right cross.

"Steve!" Sandy screamed.

Marstow got to his feet slowly, unsteadily. The room was weaving. Sandy was weaving. Half a dozen Saffel's wove together and closed with him. He put his hands up and swung wildly. He felt the numbing contact as his fist bounced off Saffel's jaw. The bigger man stumbled back two steps and shook it off. He was smiling. He liked to fight. Cliff Savage was that way too. Marstow had made both of them that way. Two fighters. He didn't have a chance with Saffel.

Saffel was laughing now. "You were bluffing, weren't you?" he said.

Marstow nodded. His lips were swollen. He couldn't talk. He picked up something and hurled it at Saffel, who ducked and pinned his arms to his sides.

"All right," Marstow said bleakly. "You win. Bring me a typewriter so I can write the story your way."

He was excited. He hoped his face didn't show it. He had an idea and he thought it was a good idea but he would not know for sure until he tried it. Chuckling, Saffel left the room and returned a few moments later with a typewriter. Sandy was trying to make Marstow comfortable on the kidney-shaped sofa. Saffel put the typewriter on the cocktail table and placed a ream of paper beside it.

"Start writing," he said.

Marstow got up and inserted a sheet in the roller. He began to type:

Tony Saffel was a tall man who favored midnight-blue tuxedos. He had a hard smile and the hardness was

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not a sham. He was a capable man and a talented man and although he was on the wrong side of the law, that did not mean he had no code of ethics. He . . .

"Hey, that's all right," Saffel said over his shoulder. "That's pretty good. But get to the point, will you?"

Marstow merely smiled. Sandy looked at him sympathetically. "Well?" Saffel said. Then: "Say, what is this? What's happening to me? What kind of a trick . . . ?" His voice trailed off shrilly.

He grew smaller and smaller.

Marstow smiled and watched him. If you had created a character by writing about him in the real world and this brought him to life in the parallel world of fictional characters, then it followed if you created him in the parallel world of fictional characters he would be brought to life in a second parallel world, a world parallel to that one. He might be able to make the one-stage jump into the first parallel world, but he could never make the two-stage jump to the real world. He could never bother you again. . . .

"Are you ready to go back?" Marstow asked his wife. He smiled tenderly . . .

She looked at him vaguely. Already she was forgetting.

"Wife all right?" Wanda asked him later.

"Sleeping upstairs. She forgot everything that happened."

"Naturally," Cliff Savage said, holding Wanda's hand and smiling at Marstow, "only a writer would understand and remember." He looked at the fire burning on the hearth. First one of the new fall, Marstow had told him. He said: "You burned it?"

"You're not in a cement overcoat any longer, are you?"

"I guess not, Jack. What now?"

"You can rest for a year or so if you want. My royalties will carry us. Why don't you two get married?"

"Maybe we will," Wanda said, and beamed up at Cliff Savage.

She kissed Marstow on the cheek and grew smaller and smaller with Cliff Savage until both of them disappeared into the typewriter. Grinning, Marstow looked at what he had written there when he had gone after Sandy. He had written:

Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid . . .

THE END

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EVERYBODY'S WATCHING YOU

By C. H. THAMES

You are a contestant on a quiz show of the future. The prize is a half-million dollars. All you have to do is locate something that doesn't exist. But you've got a gorgeous, willing blonde to help.

THE man from the studio fought his way through the crowd toward Lon Haney.

Someone stepped on the wire trailing from the portable mike and the man from the studio bent down in an attempt to yank it loose. Momentarily, his head disappeared in the crowd, like the head of a drowned man in the trough between waves in a stormy ocean.

"I'm over here!" Lon Haney shouted desperately, waving both hands over his head.

The words were hardly of an inspiring nature, but everyone in the pushing, shoving crowd applauded. "Attaboy, Lonnie!" A woman who had been dreaming of Lonnie Haney but who had never seen him in the flesh until this moment exulted. "Attaboy, Lon! You tell 'em!"

Lonnie looked about himself frantically. The bald pink head of the man from the studio had not yet made its reappearance. The crowd surged toward Lonnie on all sides, bobbing and jostling like flotsam in a flood. He waved again and said, "Here I am!" but his voice was lost in the furious din. He craned his neck, already thin and scrawny, so that he resembled a harried ostrich. Still no sign of the studio man and his mike. Still no sign of the two studio bodyguards who had been swept under in the first wild rush of the crowd.

So this is what it's like to be a celebrity, Lonnie Haney thought in some despair. Between the omnipresent

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They stepped through the screen. Millions of people gasped.

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crowds and his own attempts to bone up on the general science category for the final week's question in TV's Million Dollar Dilemma, Lonnie had hardly been able to sleep for six days and six nights. Now, on the seventh day, while the studio man and his portable crew came to Lonnie's apartment to hear—and to relay to all the world on a special hookup which would interrupt every major TV broadcast from Spokane, Washington to Aukland, New Zealand—whether Lonnie had decided to keep his five hundred thousand dollars or risk every cent of it in a final attempt this evening to answer the Million Dollar Dilemma at the studio.

It was Lonnie's mistake to be outdoors. But the early Spring afternoon had been an unexpectedly mild one and Lonnie, whose habits had been simple until his first and subsequent appearances on the Million Dollar Dilemma, had always liked to take quiet walks through his neighborhood for exercise. Returning from this particular walk he had found Mr. Maye, the studio man, and a crowd of several thousand wildly shouting Lonnie Haney fans waiting outside his apartment building. The bodyguards, who had been following Lonnie on his walk, became Jonah to the whale of the mob.

All at once thin female arms circled Lonnie's neck and something wet was planted against his cheek. A voice croaked in his ear: "I kissed him! I kissed him!"

The bony arms withdrew, but not before Lonnie saw a spinsterish face with a look of rapture clouding the features. A man waved something. Lonnie gathered it was a contract to sign, something about why Lonnie smoked such-and-such cigarettes and how much money he would make for the testimonial. A fountain pen was thrust at him, but Lonnie squirmed away from it and was still looking vainly for Mr. Maye from the studio.

"How's about a free cruise around the world, courtesy of the Green Star Line, Mr. Haney?" a voice at Lonnie's elbow chirped. "Every year, you see, Green Star runs its famous celebrity cruise, including on its passenger list some famous person, some man of the hour, to attract a boatload of other guests who, frankly, will pay through the nose to cruise around the world with a famous celebrity sharing their itinerary. You,

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Mr. Haney, are obviously the world's most celebrated—"

The voice rattled on and was drowned by a sea of other voices, or screaming bobby-soxers, con-men, ad-men (is there a difference? Lonnie wondered), enamored females, curiosity-seekers. Pretty soon, Lonnie thought, they will start grabbing things. They always started grabbing things unless Mr. Maye could get the at-home interview underway in a few moments. Grabbing things meant grabbing Lonnie Haney's clothing. They generally left Lonnie in his underwear, everyone bearing souvenirs of his clothing home in triumph and consequently baring Lonnie.

Such, Lonnie thought as he fought his way toward where he thought the struggling Mr. Maye might have gone under the crowd, are the wages of fame.

Because — obviously—Lonnie Haney was the most famous man in the world today.

Lonnie Haney was the first man in history ever to answer the Million Dollar Dilemma's Five Hundred Thousand Dollar Question correctly, the first who had the opportunity to go for a million. Lonnie Haney was the Taj Mahal and Eiffel Tower of the television networks. The five hundred thousand bucks, L o n n i e thought, was tax-free. So was the million, if he got it. New provision, with the studio absorbing the tax load.

If Lonnie missed the million dollar question, he would have nothing. There was no consolation prize.

But Lonnie had to go on and try for it.

The mobs of frenzied well-wishers would never understand that. Lonnie hardly understood it himself.

It was blackmail, kind of.

Lonnie sighed and even smiled slightly and almost forgot the crowd. If one had to be blackmailed, that certainly was the way.

But if all the Lonnie Haney fan clubs knew about it, they would lynch their idol. For Lonnie, catapulted to world-wide fame on the strength of his knowledge of the general science category, had not answered one of the Million Dollar Dilemma's questions without help.

Help, clearly, was illegal.

So Lonnie was a sham. A criminal, he thought. He shuddered.

Then he thought of where the help came from. He sighed. The wages of evil, he thought, and smiled.

The crowd sobered him.

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The crowd roared. Faces leered. Voices screamed. Flashbulbs popped and flared. Suddenly a microphone was thrust under Lonnie's nose. Mr. Maye's sweating red face appeared, ringed in by elbows. Overhead, from a second floor window of the apartment house in which Lonnie lived, a TV crane was lowered and a camera picked up Mr. Maye's image. Magically Mr. Maye became aware of it. He beamed and beamed.

He said, roaring into the microphone and giving the TV screen a professional leer, "This is Morgan Maye, ladies and gentlemen. I don't have to tell you where I am or why I am here. I don't have to tell you that my voice is now reaching the largest television audience in the history of the industry. I don't have to tell you—"

As if by magic, the crowd outside Lonnie Haney's apartment house became orderly. This was the ultimate. This, for the moment at least, until some new fad came along, was the zenith of their existence. They listened raptly.

Their zenith, Lonnie Haney thought. And my nadir?

After three minutes, Mr. Maye disposed of the various items which he did not have to tell his audience. Then he said, voice gone to a whisper all at once, "Standing beside me and needing no introduction, ladies and gentlemen, is Lonnie Haney. Ladies and gentlemen, the next voice you hear will be that of Lonnie Haney!"

Lonnie mumbled something apologetically into the microphone. The crowd screamed.

"Haney for president!" someone shouted.

"And now, folks," Mr. Maye said, *sotto-voce*, "we are going to ask Lonnie Haney the question we have all been waiting for. Before we do, though, we would like to welcome station BSL in Little America, Antarctica, which is joining us today. BSL's TV tower in the wastes of Antarctica swells the number of stations receiving this radio-TV simulcast to six thousand and seventeen, the number of people in Lonnie Haney's audience to one and a quarter billions. Lonnie, how do you feel about all those people?"

Lonnie mumbled something apologetically into the microphone. The crowd screamed.

"Last week," Mr. Maye said in a terse whisper, "Lonnie answered flawlessly the five hundred thousand dollar question. We sent him home here to suburban Jackson Heights

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to think over the hardest decision of his life. Lonnie can take his half a million dollars or be the first contestant in our two year history to try for the Million Dollar Dilemma. You all know, of course—all of you including the penguins down in Little America, heh-heh, how our program works. Lonnie may refuse the Million Dollar Dilemma, in which case he goes home tonight from our studio with a tax-free check for half a million dollars. Or, Lonnie may risk it all and try for a million. In either case, all we get from Lonnie here this afternoon is his answer. The really big moment comes tonight at the studio. And finally, folks, should Lonnie miss the Million Dollar Dilemma, he still has a final alternative. The sponsors of Million Dollar Dilemma would then challenge Lonnie with what we of Station NYT like to call the Consequential Option. And you all know how that works!"

Lonnie shuddered. If he missed the question he was all washed up. The so-called Consequential Option was merely a fillip for the maw of the audience. Because if you missed the question and got the option, you always optioned out. It had always been that way. The questions were hard, but the options were impossible. The last man to receive one, after having failed to answer the quarter of a million dollar question, was given the length of the program—one hour—to find and bring back to the studio a fresh ostrich egg with a triple yoke. Obviously, he had failed.

Still, Lonnie would have to try the million dollar question. He was being blackmailed. He heard Mr. Maye's voice drone on now, heard the carefully calculated modulations that made a rapt audience more rapt. Mr. Maye was very good at that sort of thing, as Lonnie was very bad. Lonnie, a bachelor whose life had so far consisted not of thirty-one summers because it had not been that happy and not of thirty-one winters because it had not been that sad, but of thirty-one autumns, worked as a C.P.A. in a small New York firm. He was Mr. Everybody, that's what Mr. Maye said. He was plain, ordinary, typical Mr. World. He was the guy on the street corner in Bombay, India, and Adis Ababa, Ethiopia, as well as Jackson Heights, New York, with just a change of clothing. He had risen meteorically from total obscurity to fan-

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tastic world-wide fame. Until he had been approached by the Million Dollar Dilemma people he had spent half his waking hours in mild boredom and the other half wishing something interesting would happen to him.

Now he had won half a million dollars and was being blackmailed into throwing it away in an attempt to get half a million more.

"... so," Mr. Maye was saying, "we now ask Lonnie Haney for his big decision. Lonnie, we have an audience of over one billion people. Everybody is watching you, Lonnie. What is your decision? Will you take your five hundred thousand dollars—" the Maye voice faded to a barely audible but highly dramatic whisper—"or appear at the studio tonight and risk it all in your quest after the Million Dollar Dilemma?"

Lonnie cleared his throat. The crowd screamed. Lonnie could not get away with mumbling something apologetic into the microphone now. This, as they said, was it. Lonnie cleared his throat again. The crowd screamed.

Lonnie gulped. "I'll try for the million dollars," he said.

The crowd stampeded in a frenzy of glee, but now the studio's bodyguards, reinforced by the neighborhood police, formed a cordon around Lonnie. So surrounded he made his way into the lobby of his apartment building while a TV camera followed him as far as the elevator and Mr. Maye's voice said—to an audience of a billion people, "We'll see you at the studio tonight, Lonnie Haney. Ladies and gentlemen, I can't go on. I'm all choked up inside. Ladies and gents—I—I give you Lonnie Haney, the man of destiny!"

But by this time the man of destiny was out of range of the TV cameras and slinking along the third floor hallway of the apartment building while his bodyguards dispersed the crowd on the street below.

"O.K.," Lonnie said glumly. "I told them I'd try."

He was pacing back and forth in the bedroom of his bachelor apartment, wearing a groove in the rug in front of the bathroom door. Water was splashing in the bathroom. The splashing suddenly stopped.

"Be right out, Lonnie," a voice said. It was a woman's voice and it sent anticipatory shivers up and down Lonnie's half a million dollar spine. "I knew you'd try."

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"Knew!" Lonnie cried. "You blackmailed me!"

The bathroom door opened. A radiantly beautiful young lady with long platinum blonde hair and a towel draped across one shapely shoulder like a Roman toga, stood in the doorway.

"Hello, Lonnie," she said.

"Hello," Lonnie said.

"On Earth," she said, "there never would have been any problem. Of course you would have tried for the next question."

"I keep trying to tell you," Lonnie said, "this is Earth."

"You can call it what you want, Lonnie. But I ought to know where Earth is. I come from Earth. So how can this be Earth."

"Let it ride," Lonnie suggested. "I seem to be letting everything ride these days."

"Parallel worlds," the beautiful creature said, advancing toward Lonnie in a nimbus of seductive perfume. She had long legs, golden legs with a sheen of silk, lovely, breathtaking legs revealed to midthigh when the towel parted as she walked to Lonnie. "Besides," she said, "you had to go on."

"Yeah," Lonnie said.

"Kiss me, please."

That always got him. The please. He was just plain Lonnie Haney—with or without the half million dollars he had won. Hell, she wasn't making a play for him for his money. It was actually her money because she had supplied the answers to all the questions on the Million Dollar Dilemma. And she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. She knew it and she let Lonnie know it and she didn't exactly keep her charms hidden.

She had been living with Lonnie Haney since he had first been tapped for the Million Dollar Dilemma. She seemed genuinely to like him. She let Lonnie know that too, and not merely in words.

But she wouldn't let him quit.

Passionately, he wanted to quit. He tried it again now after they kissed. Even as he tried, though, he knew it was useless.

"I can still change my mind," he said.

"No you can't. I won't let you. If you do, I'll tell everybody I gave you all the answers to all the questions."

"But nobody can see you except me." That was true. Lonnie had experienced it himself once when Mr. Maye had visited him. All during the visit Narla—that was

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what the lovely girl called herself—had been sitting on Lonnie's lap. He had been endlessly distracted and Mr. Maye probably thought his behavior was incredible, but not for a moment had Mr. Maye guessed anybody else had been in the room.

"That's because I don't want anybody else to see me," Narla said. "I assure you, they can if they want."

He believed her. He had no choice.

He remembered with a slight shudder the first time they had put him in the Million Dollar Dilemma's Question Crypt on the big TV stage. They had asked some question or other in general science and it had thrown him. Suddenly, squeezed against him in the Question Crypt, was Narla. She told him the answer and he blurted it out and she came home to live with him and every week she told him the answer in the Question Crypt and now, tonight, was the final question, the million dollar question.

"All right," he said wearily. "All right, Narla. But you never even told me why you're doing this."

"What are you worrying about? I answered all the other questions for you, didn't I?"

"What do you want?"

Narla smiled. "You," she said, and kissed him.

Lonnie was not that dishonest with himself. Both on this Earth and the other Earth—if Narla's story of parallel Earths was true—there were men, millions of men, who would make better companions for the beautiful Narla. Yet, somehow, for some reason, she had selected Lonnie. "That's not the reason," he told her. "I wish it was, but it isn't."

"I said I want you. That's the truth. I didn't say why I wanted you."

"Oh?"

"Oh. Did you ever stop to wonder why I can answer your quiz questions so easily?"

"You're not only beautiful, you're a genius. Isn't that enough?"

"It may be enough, but it isn't the right answer."

"Then what is?"

"On Earth we take—"

"This is Earth, Narla. It's Earth. It's the only world we have. If you live someplace else, then it's not Earth."

"On my Earth, then. They're parallel worlds, you see, co-existing side-by-side in parallel dimensions, like soap

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bubbles which interlock, like twin soap bubbles. They are essentially the same, except that—"

"You already told me this stuff. I don't understand. I'll never understand. Please get to the point."

"Well, there are differences. In my world, for example, Adolph Hitler was killed in the Munich Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. So, there wasn't any Second World War."

"No Second World War!" Lonnie cried.

"That's right, and it's crucial. TV developed in the 1930's instead of the late 1940's, because my Earth didn't spend all its money rearming for the conflict. You know what happened?"

"How should I know? I live on Earth."

"My world is Earth, Lonnie. Anyway, TV is twenty years ahead on my Earth. We are now a TV-oriented, spectator-oriented world. Maybe your world will be that way too, in another twenty years. Anyhow—"

"Why did you pick me?" Lonnie asked again.

"This is the last day so you have a right to know. I'm coming to it. TV is the dominant factor on my world—and the quiz show is a dominant factor in TV, although—" with an unexpectedly grim smile—"when you get to see the kind of quiz shows we have, you're going to be surprised."

"When *I* get to see—"

"Exactly, Lonnie. I help you, you help me. You see, tonight when we're in the Question Crypt on the TV stage we will be both spatially and temporarily, in a perfect position to bridge the dimensional gap between our worlds. In other words—"

"Wow!" Lonnie said. "Slow down. My mind doesn't work like yours. Trip-hammer."

"Do I look like a trip-hammer?"

Lonnie looked at her. The bath towel had all but entirely come loose. She was dry now. She was very lovely. She came and sat on his lap. She said, but Lonnie was now beyond hearing the words or caring about them if he had heard them, "Then why worry about it, Lonnie? If you can't understand, don't try. You'll see soon enough. In the Question Crypt tonight. All right?"

"All right," Lonnie said hoarsely.

"Then kiss me."

Lonnie mumbled something apologetically, as if he were in front of Mr. Maye's microphone.

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"Please."

It was always the please which got him.

It was very dark in the Question Crypt, but delightfully crowded. The delightful part of the crowd was Narla, but only Lonnie could see her. The Crypt was made for one man, so they were packed like sardines in a two-sardine can.

Even when the lights inside the Crypt went on suddenly, Lonnie knew he was the only one who could see Narla. The studio audience, the armed guards who watched over the questions, Mr. Maye, the billion-plus people of the TV audience—all saw only Lonnie.

Because Narla chose to remain invisible to everyone except Lonnie.

Lonnie could feel his heart bobbing up and down as if it couldn't make up its mind to stay where it belonged, banging away behind his ribs, or to jump up into his throat. Even Mr. Maye, polished performer that he was, looked nervous, *was* nervous. He mopped sweat from his brow, and that was not a calculated stunt. He was sweating. One billion people were sweating —all for Lonnie.

This very minute, Lonnie thought, I'm the toast of the world. Me, Lonnie Haney. But I'm a fake. I haven't answered a question for myself . . .

"Are you ready, Lonnie?" Mr. Maye asked. He licked his lips.

"As ready as I'll ever be," Lonnie said mechanically, apologetically.

"And you guarantee that you are receiving no help in any way from the audience or anyone else?"

And when I answer, Lonnie thought, that makes me a gold - plated, million - buck phoney.

"Answer the man," Narla said. "Tell him yes."

"But it's a lie, because you—"

"Tell him yes, Lonnie. You never could understand. I've never explained it to you, but if you haven't been answering the questions here on your world, once we get to Earth you—"

"This is Earth."

"Just answer the man's question, for heaven's sake!"

"Er, yes," Lonnie said.

"Very well then, Lonnie Haney. We of the Million Dollar Dilemma are proud to ask you our Million Dollar Question. You know, of course, as our vast studio audience and our even vaster—far, far vaster—radio and TV audience knows, that you are the very first contestant to suc-

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cessfully answer the five hundred thousand dollar question. But tonight, tonight, Lonnie Haney, of your own free will you put that five hundred thousand dollars, all of it, on the line, in an attempt to go for the million dollar question. Is that right, Lonnie Haney?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come now, Lonnie," Mr. Maye chided. "Call me Morgan. You've been calling me Morgan all along. Morgan, for Morgan Maye. If you've been calling me Morgan all along—"

"Yes, sir, Morgan," Lonnie said apologetically.

"The whole world is watching you, Lonnie. Are you ready? Ready for the million dollar question?"

If he said that once more, Lonnie would scream. Lonnie took a deep breath which escaped his throat after a few seconds with a slight rattle. "I'm ready," he said.

"And your category is general science? Are you ready for the million dollar question in general science?"

Lonnie gulped. Narla squeezed his hand, then squeezed against him in the sardine can of a Question Crypt.

"I will read the question for you twice," Mr. Maye said, opening the question box with trembling fingers. Two armed guards in glittering studio uniforms, stood on either side of him at port arms with submachine guns. It was unnecessary but it was dramatic. A billion people, Lonnie knew, were sucking in their breaths and waiting—exactly as Lonnie himself was . . .

"Then I will allow you one minute to consider your answer," Mr. Maye said. Lonnie knew this by heart and so did the vast audience. But Mr. Maye went serenely on: "At the end of that time, if you cannot answer the million dollar question, the Million Dollar Dilemma and its sponsor will give you one final opportunity to win your million dollars—the famous Consequential Option. But let us hope, Lonnie, that it will not be necessary for you to take the Option. Right, folks?"

Roaring and stamping their feet for three minutes, the studio audience conceded this point.

"Very well then," Mr. Maye intoned.

The band played something solemn with a faint upbeat at the end.

Lonnie gulped. Narla giggled.

"Your question, Lonnie

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Haney," said Mr. Maye, unfolding the paper he had found inside the question box.

Lonnie looked at the two uniformed men with their submachine guns. Obviously, studio props. The guns weren't loaded. If they were, though, and if their bearers knew the truth, Lonnie thought he could hardly blame them for emptying the magazines at him.

"Your question, Lonnie Haney," Mr. Maye repeated. "Are you ready?"

After a while Lonnie said he was ready.

"Tell me, Lonnie, for one million dollars—Science has long known that the whole universe and all its mysterious functions rest to a very large extent on two famous laws of physics. These, as we hope you know, are the first and second laws of thermodynamics. For one million dollars, Lonnie—" a cold, clear, precise voice now, rising above the occasion, polished, p r o f e s s i o n a l, agonizingly aloof, "tell me what the first law of thermodynamics is, and what the second law of thermodynamics is, and tell me why the second law is probably the most important single operational factor in the functioning of our entire stellar universe. You have one minute to think out your answer, Lonnie."

Light was glaring on him now. Weird music played. It was seductive music almost, lulling you, lulling you to sleep, to lethargy . . . thermodynamics? What the hell was thermodynamics?

Narla was giggling. This was the first time she had giggled in the Question Crypt. Before today she had been very matter-of-fact in there.

"You never heard of thermodynamics, Lonnie, did you?" she asked him.

"Well, no. But thermo, that's heat, isn't it? And dynamics has something to do with—well, like a dynamo. With energy or—with movement, huh? With movement?" he said hopefully.

"That's the general idea, but it isn't the answer to Mr. Maye's three part question."

"No, I know it isn't. Do you know the answer, Narla?"

She nodded promptly. "Oh, yes, I know the answer, Lonnie."

Visions floated before his eyes—visions of Lonnie Haney and a million tax-free dollars. Visions of Lonnie Haney and his million dollars, after the furor had died down, after the world had forgotten him. Lonnie Haney,

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seeing all the places he had always dreamed about, doing all the things he had always dreamed of doing—

But first the wonderful notoriety. That would be pleasant too. The most famous quiz contestant in the history of the world, feted and toasted and—

"Minute's almost up," Lonnie said happily. "You said you know the answer, Narla?"

It was very hot in the Question Crypt. Naturally, they could have air-conditioned it, but they didn't want to. This way, Lonnie sweated. This way, some of the tension of the situation was translated into terms they could understand for the vast TV audience—translated in the sweat forming on Lonnie's face.

"Oh, I know the answer all right," Narla admitted, and giggled again.

The music reached its peak, not seductively lulling now. Strident. Imperative.

"Minute's up," Lonnie said as the music stopped and the audience buzzed.

"I will repeat the question," Mr. Maye said breathlessly. "Science has long known that the whole universe and all its mysterious functions rest to a very large extent on two famous laws of physics. These are the first and second laws of thermodynamics. For one million dollars, Lonnie, tell me what the first law of thermodynamics is, and what the second law of thermodynamics is, and tell me why the second law is probably the most important single operational factor in the functioning of our entire stellar universe. For one million dollars . . ."

"You know?" Lonnie asked Narla for the third time. "You better know, because I don't."

"Oh, I know," Narla admitted.

"So, tell me."

Narla was still giggling.

"The world is waiting for your answer, Lonnie," Mr. Maye said anxiously.

"Tell me," Lonnie whispered behind his cupped hand.

"I know the answer," Narla said, teasing him. Then she stopped giggling. Her beautiful face looked suddenly very serious. "But I won't tell you."

"You what?" Lonnie hissed, watching the ecstatic vision of Lonnie Haney, lifelong playboy, shatter to a million pieces.

"Did you say something, Lonnie?" Mr. Maye urged him. "What is your answer to the million dollar question, Lonnie?"

"But you've got to tell me,

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Narla," Lonnie whispered. "You got me this far. You—"

"I can't tell you. If I tell you, we leave the Question Crypt. But it's too early. We can't leave because we've got to wait for the moment of cross-over. Cross - over to Earth, you see—"

"This is Earth—" Lonnie said automatically, his voice trailing off in abject misery.

"I can't tell you and that's final," Narla repeated.

"Then I lose the million dollars? I go home with nothing?"

Narla shook her head. "Cheer up, Lon," she said brightly. "You still have the Consequential Option."

"Oh, sure," Lonnie said bitterly. "No one can do a Consequential Option in the time allotted. You know that. It just makes the sponsor look like a great guy to give you the opportunity, is all."

Narla shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Lonnie, it doesn't look like you have much choice."

And, of course, he did not. Seconds later Mr. Maye said in a disappointed voice, "Your one minute is up, Lonnie," and Lonnie said, in a pained voice: "I can't answer your question, Mr. Maye."

Mr. Maye groaned. The studio audience groaned with him. And out across the world, from Bangor, Maine to Fiji, a billion other people groaned their disappointment.

Mr. Maye gulped, munching on his Adam's apple. Then, brightening, he misquoted, "We have lost the round, but all is not lost. For our sponsor—" and he named the sponsor, with reverence—"will now offer you the Consequential Option. Lonnie, as you know, you will have until the end of the program to do for us what we will ask you to do in the Consequential Option. If you succeed, the million dollars is yours. If you fail, we have a box of our sponsor's product for you, each month, every month, for the rest of your life. Now, Lonnie. Are you ready for the Consequential Option?"

Lonnie mumbled something apologetic into the microphone.

Narla giggled.

"Here, then, is your Consequential Option, L o n n i e Haney. As you may know, the fabled Roc is the largest bird that ever lived—if, heh, heh, it ever did live. The Roc is celebrated in the legends of the Arabian Nights and very possibly, according to orinthologists, did exist at some time in the fabled past in the

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Middle East. Your Consequential Option, Lonnie, is this: with the camera with which the Million Dollar Dilemma supplies you, take a picture of a Roc and bring it back to us before the program ends. Is that clear? Here is your camera, Lonnie."

The Question Crypt opened. Something was thrust at Lonnie, and he took it with numb hands. How could he take a picture of a bird which never was, a bird which existed only in fable? That was it, he thought grimly, that was the very end of his million dollars . . .

"We don't have Rocs on Earth," he told Narla miserably.

Narla grinned at him. "I keep telling you this isn't Earth. My world is Earth. And we do so have Rocs on Earth!"

"What?" Lonnie gasped. "What!"

Afterwards, Lonnie told himself that he was never aware of any change or transformation or alteration or whatever happened when you went from the world we knew as Earth to the world Narla knew as Earth. But when the Question Crypt opened, Lonnie blinked. He rubbed his eyes. He turned around and began to walk back into the Question Crypt, but Narla grabbed his elbow and led him toward the center of the stage.

It was not the Million Dollar Dilemma stage.

For one thing, there were three question crypts. They stood side by side with Lonnie's in the center.

For another, the sign on the wall did not say Million Dollar Dilemma. It said, in three-foot high gold-spangled letters, Bet Your Death.

For a third, the master of ceremonies was not Mr. Morgan Maye but was a rotund little man with a cheerful face with cheeks almost like red Christmas tree bulbs. And the master of ceremonies stared right through Lonnie as if he did not exist. At the very least, as if he were invisible.

A single figure marched from each of the other two question crypts. One was a timid-looking little man, bespectacled, mousey-haired, with nervous darting eyes. The other was dressed as a big-game hunter.

Flanked by two armed guards who carried sub-machine guns like the sub-machine guns of the guards in Million Dollar Dilemma, the master of ceremonies said, smiling, "All right, then, la-

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dies and gents, since none of our contestants could give us a fifty word account of Max Piersall's Unified Field Theory in the ten seconds allotted them, we of Bet Your Death offer the option of Deeds Not Words . . ."

While the audience went hysterical with glee, Lonnie observed, "Why, that sounds something like the Consequential Option on Earth."

"This is Earth," Narla said, and Lonnie instantly realized that now the shoe was on the other foot. For they had bridged the dimensional gulf and were in Narla's world now. "The only difference between your Consequential Option and our Deeds Not Words," Narla went on, "is that our contestants always get them because they can never answer the questions. But listen—"

"Deeds Not Words!" cried the master of ceremonies. "Are our three contestants ready?"

The man in hunting garb nodded eagerly, his pith helmet bobbing. The timid-looking man cast furtive glances to right and left, gulped, and said he was ready. Narla smiled and nodded.

"Here, then, is the Deed you must perform. A speedy Bet Your Death jet transport will take all of you to the Arabian Desert where, armed only with high-powered rifles, you must hunt down and kill a Roc."

The audience groaned. It sounded very much like an Earthly audience, Lonnie thought, until he remembered Narla's words: this *was* Earth.

The M.C. went on: "Naturally, you will be pitted not only against wild nature, but against one another. No holds, as they say, are barred. Whichever one of you that can return here to this stage in time for tomorrow's program with the head and claws of a newly slain Roc will be adjudged the winner. Your reward will be life—" the M.C. paused significantly—"and a certificate barring you from participant roles in any of the worldwide quiz shows for a period of ten years, unless you waive this right."

The man in the big-game hunting outfit smiled. Apparently he waived this right.

"What happens to those who don't get the Roc?" Lonnie asked Narla.

She shrugged. "They're left in the Arabian Desert, I'm afraid." She wasn't, Lonnie observed, giggling now.

"Do you, Narla Smith," the

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M.C. asked in hushed voice, "understand the rules of Bet Your Death fully?"

Narla said that she did.

"And do you, Ben Dolin?"

The small, meek-looking man said nothing for the moment. Transfixing him with close-set eyes, the M.C. said nothing and turned to the third figure, the hunter. "I don't have to ask you, Stanley M. Hodges," he said.

The crowd roared. Three slender cheerleaders in white sweaters with big SMH's stitched on their fronts leaped forward and led a cheer which went, "Hodges! Hodges! Rayhah-Hodges!"

The crowd loved it. Lonnie was reminded of a football game.

Stanley M. Hodges removed his pith helmet and bowed. The crowd ate it up. The cheerleaders did cartwheels.

"Ben Dolin?" the M.S. spat out suddenly, transfixing the little man with his stare again. "We return to you, Ben Dolin."

Dolin gulped. Suddenly and sympathetically, Lonnie saw in little Ben Dolin an exaggeration of himself. Lonnie had come almost all the way in the Million Dollar Dilemma. Dolin had come this far in Bet Your Death. Lonnie was scared. Dolin was virtually petrified. Of course, Lonnie was beginning to gather that poor Dolin had something to be petrified about.

"Well, Ben Dolin?" the M.C. asked.

The audience was utterly silent now. The two-submachine gun carrying guards stared at the little man grimly and — Lonnie thought — expectantly.

"I would like to say a few words," Ben Dolin gasped apologetically.

The M.C. nodded. "That is your right."

"Don't give me a rifle. I'm a bad shot. I'd never be able to kill a Roc. I don't want to die of thirst and heat exhaustion on the Arabian Desert. Even if, by some incredible chance of luck, I managed to kill a Roc, this professional hunter, this Stanley M. Hodges, would take it away from me. I guess I haven't a chance. I'm a born spectator, not a participant."

"Chance you take," said the M.C., "putting your name in the phone book. But does this mean you refuse to compete? Because if you do, the laws clearly stipulate—"

The little man suddenly screamed: "You'll have to catch me first!" and bolted off the stage. A slender, surpris-

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ingly graceful figure, he sprinted up the aisle to the accompaniment of much howling and foot-stamping in the audience.

One of the sub-machine gunners dropped to one knee, pointed his weapon, and fired. There was a clattering sound, like hail. Magically, spectators dropped out of the way on all sides, ducking desperately behind chairbacks. Slugs ricochetted about the big hall. Women screamed.

Ben Dolin got as far as the door.

Then the second sub-machine gunner assumed the firing position and let loose a hail of slugs. They stitched a quick trail across the wall to the left of the door at which Ben Dolin was frantically clawing, stitched a trail across the door and across Dolin himself and across the wall on the other side of the door. Dolin fell down and while the crowd roared and cheered, the M.C. handed the victorious sub-machine gunner a sheaf of hundred dollar bills. The band played the Bet Your Death theme song and the triumphant guard blushed modestly.

"Those," said Lonnie desperately, "were real bullets."

"I told you our quiz shows were different from yours. More serious, you might say."

"But I—"

"You are invisible. I can't be seen talking to you. Please be quiet."

The M.C. was saying: "Yes, sir, folks. Bet Your Death separates the sheep from the men, the men from the mice, the mice from the boys, in a hurry. Now, then, if you're ready?"

Stanley M. Hodges said he was ready. Narla said she was ready. A girl wearing only strategically located spangles brought out two rifle-cases. She bowed low before Stanley M. Hodges, depositing one of the weapons there. She left the second one in front of Narla who, apparently, did not merit the full treatment, the bowing and scraping.

"A man and a woman, folks," the M.C. said cheerfully, "people just like yourselves. Real, homey folks—pitted against the fabled Roc. Pitted against each other. Tomorrow, one of them may return here alive. To the other, a hero's death. Isn't it wonderful?"

The audience responded with a show of enthusiasm.

"For those who remain until tomorrow's program," the M.C. went on, "our lobby tote board will be in operation.

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The early line odds, as handed to me by our technicians, establishes Hodges as a two-hundred to one favorite—"

"He's the Earth's outstanding Deeds Not Words man," Narla admitted to Lonnie. "That's why I needed an ally. Especially an ally who wouldn't be afraid of him because he never saw him in action." While talking, she opened the rifle-case and examined her weapon expertly, opening the chamber and peering down the muzzle at her thumb-nail, looking for lint on the sights, testing the trigger action.

"You mean me?" Lonnie asked.

"I mean you. Ever been to the Arabian Desert on your world?"

"No. I was to Death Valley once, on a Greyhound Tour—"

"Well, our Arabian Desert is the same as your Arabian Desert, except we have Rocs. Got your camera?"

"Yes," said Lonnie. The .35 mm camera hung suspended from his neck by a leather thong.

"And I've got my rifle."

"They killed him," Lonnie said accusingly. "Ben Dolin."

"Naturally."

"But . . ."

"A man has the right to die in the studio if he wants. Say, don't you believe in democracy?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Dolin knew Stanley M. Hodges' reputation, that's all. Hodges has participated in enough quizzes to be exempt for life. But he doesn't want to be exempt. He loves participation. He's the world's foremost hunter. He has fifty trophies, including ten manskins."

"Is a manskin what I think a manskin is?"

"Of course a manskin is what you think a manskin is."

Lonnie scratched his head wonderingly and with mounting fear. "I thought you wanted an ally who didn't know about Hodges so he wouldn't be petrified with fear of Hodges."

"I want you to know *something* about him," Narla said. "You know the old saw: to be forewarned is to be forearmed."

"I see."

"What are you shaking your head for?"

"Because I want no part of this."

"I helped you!"

"I didn't ask you to."

"Besides, if we go out there and you get your picture of a Roc, it's worth a million dollars to you."

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"It isn't worth anything if I don't come back."

"A million dollars, Lonnie."

"If I die out there."

"And me."

"What did you say?"

"For the rest of our lives, in your world or mine, wherever you want."

A million dollars. And the world's most beautiful woman. Make that two worlds' most beautiful woman.

It was inviting.

But the other side of the coin was death.

"If we find the Roc. If we get the Roc," Lonnie said. The way he said it was a question.

"Stanley M. Hodges would try to kill us. I won't lie to you."

Just then a big car was driven out on the stage. Beaming from ear to ear the M.C. opened the rear door and stood by while Stanley M. Hodges climbed in. Narla followed him and Lonnie invisible to everyone but Narla, brought up the rear. The door was almost closed in Lonnie's face, but he managed to squeeze through.

"Too bad," Hodges said as the car left the stage and rolled outside to a highway that would take it to the airport.

"About what?" Narla asked him. They seemed very well disposed toward one another.

"About you," said Stanley M. Hodges matter-of-factly. The driver smirked in the rear-view mirror. "We both know you don't have a chance."

Narla stared at him soberly, then averted her head and winked at Lonnie. The car purred along. Stanley M. Hodges' weapon had been deposited on Lonnie's invisible lap. Lonnie shuddered. A cold chill gripped him all the way to the airport.

Where the jet transport was waiting to take off.

He did not expect a parachute.

The pilot said, "We are now over the exact center of the Arabian Desert."

A crew member handed out parachutes. One for Hodges and one for Narla.

"What about me?" Lonnie asked Narla. "I may be invisible, but I'd still hit the ground pretty hard."

"We'll both use my 'chute, silly."

"But doesn't the plane land?"

"No. Why should it? It will land tomorrow, when it takes us back."

"Or Stanley M. Hodges."

"All right, or Stanley M.

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Hodges. But we are two against one, Lonnie."

"We're circling the drop point," the pilot said.

"There will be two hunting camps already set up down there," Narla told Lonnie. "With TV cameras, of course."

"You mean, they'll be watching us?"

"Naturally. It's all part of the program. Here, help me with the 'chute, will you?"

Lonnie helped her into the harness. He looked up and saw Stanley M. Hodges, rifle in hand, waiting at the door. A crew member opened the door and super-heated Arabian air rushed by.

"I never used a parachute before," Lonnie said as Stanley M. Hodges waved, took one step, and dropped out of sight.

Narla shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Just make sure you hug me all the way down."

They went to the door. Lonnie looked out at empty space. "Like glue," he promised. He got a good grip on Narla. Then they both jumped.

The distant desert swung around and around. First it was below them, then above them. Then alongside of them. It was not rushing up at them. It seemed very far away.

Off to one side, Stanley M. Hodges' parachute blossomed. He wasn't off to one side very long. Soon he was above them. Way above them.

"Sucker!" he called faintly.

The jet transport sped away.

"The 'chute isn't opening!" Narla wailed frantically.

Lonnie said nothing. His tongue was suddenly a swollen thing in his mouth. He couldn't talk. The falling sensation was not as bad as he thought it would be, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was that the 'chute was definitely not opening. What mattered was the ground—which now clearly was rushing up toward them.

Stanley M. Hodges floated serenely down, slowly, steadily, comfortably, far, far above them.

"The rat," wailed Narla. "He paid someone on the program. It's been done before. So our 'chute wouldn't open. He can't lose now—all he has to do is find and shoot a Roc."

"What did they do to the 'chute?"

"Pack it too tight is easiest. That way, a person's weight won't pull it opened."

At that moment, something tugged at them like a giant hand trying to pull them back into the sky. Lonnie almost

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lost his grip on Narla. Desperately, he clung to her with one hand, his feet dangling, his other arm waving, the hand groping at air.

Above them the parachute had finally opened. They were floating now, swinging back and forth pendulum-wise. They were going to be all right. There was plenty of air left between them and the ground for a slow fall.

If Lonnie could hold on.

He hung suspended over air by one hand. He could not find a hold with his other hand. He felt his one handhold slipping down from Narla's shoulder, across her body, down her leg.

He clung to one shoe.

The shoe came off. Narla screamed.

Lonnie hit on his duff and rolled over. He got a mouthful of sand. He sat up and looked around. Narla alighted alongside of him, the parachute billowing. He had lost his hold only feet from the ground.

Narla unstrapped the parachute harness and a stiff, sand-blowing desert wind whisked the 'chute away. A thousand feet above them, Hodges was still in transit.

"I never felt like this about anyone before," Lonnie said. "He tried to kill us. Coldbloodedly. If we didn't have my extra weight, you'd be dead right now. The 'chute never would have opened. Say, why don't you take a pot shot at him before he comes down? It would serve him right."

"Because," said Narla, "although you can't see them, they have TV cameras watching us. Technically, no killing is allowed until after the Roc is found and shot. Then, everything goes."

"Here's your shoe," Lonnie said.

It was very hot. It was dry and hotter than anything Lonnie had ever experienced. After they had walked half an hour, he felt dehydrated. He plodded on grimly beside Narla. They hadn't even waited for Hodges to come down.

"There's our camp up ahead," Narla said.

It was a single tent with a water bag hanging outside. They both looked at the waterbag, then at each other. They said nothing but they began to run. Lonnie's parched lips were already cracking.

The water bag was empty.

"More of Hodge's work," Narla said.

"What are we going to do?"

Instead of answering, Narla went inside the tent. She

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came back and shook her head. "No food, either."

"Where's Hodges' camp?" Lonnie asked.

"Oh, we couldn't do that. You mean take over his camp?"

"Or share it with him."

"It's against the rules."

"We wouldn't be alive ten hours if we don't. We need water. Are you going to let the rules stop you?"

"No-o, but—"

"Anyhow," Lonnie went on, "Hodges sabotaged us. Isn't that against the rules?"

"We'd never be able to prove he did it."

"It wouldn't matter if we could prove it or not. We wouldn't live to be able to show our proof—unless we do what I say. Just lead the way to Hodges' camp."

Narla nodded, and smiled. The smile surprised Lonnie until she said: "You see, that's why I needed you. An Earthman wouldn't have a chance against the combination of Stanley M. Hodges and the rules."

"I'm an Earthman."

"We've been all through that. You know what I mean."

Lonnie nodded. The small camera bounced against his chest as they walked. Narla carried the rifle.

Every few minutes they stopped to rest. The heat was enervating. After half an hour spots swam before Lonnie's eyes. Even if a Roc had swooped down over them, practically alighting, he did not think he could get it in focus to take a picture.

So, something flapped overhead, obscuring the sun. Lonnie looked up.

It was big and black.

It had wings, big, loose, flapping wings fifty feet across.

It had a beak the size of an elephant's trunk.

It cast a shadow as big as an airplane.

"Roc!" Narla screamed. "Watch out!"

"Watch out?"

"I forgot to tell you, they like to eat people."

The Roc swooped down. Dizzily, Lonnie looked up at it. Yellow claws as big as baling hooks flashed at him. He fell down, rolled over, heard a raucous, hideous cawing, jabbed at the shutter release of his camera, then quickly rolled the film to the next position, opened his eyes, saw the Roc coming down, the big black man-eating bird alighting on an outcropping of rock a dozen feet away, and centered it in his camera lense, centered it miraculously and perfectly with trembling

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hands, and took his picture. It was a beauty. It was perfect and he knew it was perfect.

And the Roc came for him.

Lonnie ran perhaps ten paces, then tripped over another outcropping. He rolled over and a shadow drifted across his eyes. The talons hovered—

A shot rang out and the Roc fell over sideways, picked itself up, fluttered its wings furiously, spraying Lonnie with sand and all but burying him in it, then fell over again and lay still. Narla came running up with her rifle.

"Some shot," she said. "Wasn't it?"

Lonnie did not say anything. He stood up shakily and took another picture of the Roc, now dead. He used the whole role of film, all thirty-five shots. He took pictures from every angle. If he ever got back to Earth—his Earth—he'd have his picture, all right.

"Splendid shot," someone said.

It wasn't Lonnie. It wasn't Narla.

Stanley M. Hodges had spoken. Looking cool and comfortable in Bermuda-length shorts and linen shirt and pith helmet, rifle held ready in both hands, Hodges approached them. "The Roc is mine," he said.

Narla held her rifle ready too. "You think so?" she said. "Try and claim it."

"I don't have to. I'll just let you die without any water. You see?"

"But that—that isn't according to the rules!"

"Why not? The Roc has been killed. All is fair now. I won't even trouble myself to take it away from you. But I offer you a chance for life, Miss Smith."

"I won't listen to you," Narla said.

Lonnie shook his head. "You'd better listen to him," he said. "He has the water."

"Well, we can just listen, I guess. All right, Mr. Hodges. What's your deal?"

"I take the Roc now. I give you half my water. You march off with it. That's all."

"That's murder. It's three hundred miles to the nearest settlement. We couldn't go thirty miles with that little water, and you know it."

"We, my dear Miss Smith? I wouldn't be going anyplace with you."

"Well, it's no deal," Narla said through cracked lips.

Hodges shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll go back to my camp and wait. See you." And he walked off jauntily.

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"The unmitigated stinker!" Narla cried.

"Thirsty?"

"You bet I'm thirsty."

"Maybe we should have taken his offer."

"He probably put cyanide in the water."

"You're probably right," Lonnie admitted. "We couldn't take his deal."

"Darned right we couldn't. Once we gave up the Roc to him, that's it. The transport comes for him tomorrow, takes him back, and leaves us."

"We'll be dead of dehydration long before then, Narla."

They were silent for a while. They looked at one another glumly. Then Narla said, "Lonnie?"

He nodded.

"I want you to know, Lonnie, I meant what I said before."

"You meant what?"

"I liked the weeks we spent together. I wanted us to spend the rest of our lives together. I meant that."

Lonnie grinned. "It looks like the rest of our lives can be measured in hours. Feel weak?"

"Very. It's the lack of moisture. Lonnie?"

"What?"

"If Hodges hadn't got the upper hand, if we had killed the Roc and you—and we—were waiting here for the transport to come down and take us back, what would you have done?"

"Celebrated, I guess. In some way."

"In what way, Lonnie?"

"Don't know," Lonnie admitted.

Narla came over to him. "Please," she said. "Hold me, Lonnie. Hold me tight. I'm scared — really and truly scared—Lonnie. But I love you. I do love you, Lonnie."

He held her. He let her go. He was thinking: they weren't licked yet, not by a long shot. He was also thinking: he had never felt so sure of himself before, cocky almost, in the face of death, where previously he had quaked in the face of a routine business interview. Narla had done that for him. Lovely Narla. Whatever happened, he was a man now. A real man.

He hoped he would not be a real man for mere hours.

"What's the matter, Lonnie? Don't you love me?"

He didn't answer. She pouted and said: "We have one chance. At night. In the dark, we could sneak up on him and—"

"Night, hell," Lonnie said.

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"I'm invisible to him. He can't see me, can he?"

"No, but—"

"Then our advantage is right now, in daylight. Not ours, mine. I'm going to Hodges' camp, Narla."

"But he'll kill you!"

"Invisible? When I'm invisible?"

Narla seemed doubtful. "The Roc saw you."

Lonnie hadn't thought of that. It was true, all right. The Roc had come straight for him. Then he brightened. "So what? So maybe Rocs can see me. But Hodges can't. He didn't, did he?"

"No," Narla admitted. "He didn't."

"Then I'm going there."

"You want the rifle?"

"No. He'd see the rifle."

"I'll follow behind you."

Lonnie shook his head. He was taking over now. He could almost feel the aegis of self-assertiveness on his shoulders. He was running things, whatever happened. "Not behind me," Lonnie said. "Give me a few minutes and circle around his camp. Come up on the other side and create some kind of diversion. I don't want him to see you on my side of the camp. On the other side. Then he'll never be expecting me."

"Lonnie, I'm afraid. It's our last chance, Lonnie. If we fail now it will be night. If we fail now, we won't have another chance."

"There's tomorrow morning."

"You know there isn't. You know we'd be too weak from lack of water."

"O.K.," Lonnie admitted. "If it's our last chance, we've got to take him. We've got to take him now. Let's go."

They left the dead Roc where it lay. Narla trailing behind him and then circling far to his left, he headed for the second desert camp.

His lips were dry and bloodless. His tongue was swollen. His limbs felt weak from lack of moisture.

Ahead of him was the tent. Hodges' tent, with a water bag hanging outside. Swollen. Full. Cool, cool water. He almost wanted to make straight for the water bag, and to hell with Hodges. He did not. He looked around for the hunter and finally spotted him.

Hodges was sitting on a folding chair in front of his tent, shaded from the sun. He held a tall cool glass of something in one hand and was leafing through the pages of a magazine with the other. He did not seem to have a care in the world.

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It would be easy, Lonnie thought. It would be incredibly easy. He isn't expecting a thing.

But just then Stanley M. Hodges came bolt upright, dropping the magazine and the cool glass and reaching for his rifle. He swung it around toward Lonnie. He began to squeeze the trigger.

That's impossible, Lonnie thought. He can't see me. How can he be shooting at me if he can't see me?

The rifle roared.

A hot hammer of pain struck Lonnie's shoulder, stunning him, spinning him around in his tracks and dropping him there. His left arm was completely numb. He could feel absolutely nothing down its entire length—except the warm wetness of his own blood.

He knew he was finished. Hodges had him: he was helpless now. Hodges lifted the rifle to his shoulder again, wordlessly.

Something black obscured the sun.

Lonnie looked up.

It was another Roc.

The Roc had alighted directly behind Lonnie and was taking off now. Hodges had not been firing at Lonnie. He had been firing at the Roc. But Lonnie had been in the way.

The Roc had a fifty foot wingspread but a body not much bigger than a man's. The Roc came for Lonnie, cawing and screaming as it came, its huge wings flapping but its claws furrowing the sand.

Then it closed with Lonnie and they grappled. The Roc screamed horribly as Lonnie got his hands about the thin, sinewy bird neck. The neck was hard, almost brittle. Lonnie tightened his fingers, amazed that he could move his left arm at all. He squeezed and felt the cartilage yielding slowly, but felt also the talons spraying sand about them, raking, raking for him . . .

Lonnie clung grimly to the Roc's neck. He was clinging for his life, and he knew it. The great bird face came close to his own. The round little bird eyes bulged. The enormous beak, elephantine, opened and snapped shut inches from his face, then opened again and remained open—

The talons raked him one final time, then Lonnie flung the dead monster away from him.

As Hodges' rifle roared.

He was shooting at the Roc, though. He emptied his magazine at the Roc, already dead. He did not know it was

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dead, of course. He did not believe his eyes. He had seen nothing to kill it.

When the rifle was empty, Lonnie walked over to Stanley M. Hodges and hit him in the face. Hodges sat down, looking startled. Lonnie waited for him to get up and hit him again. Hodges sat down a second time and got up more slowly. He looked about wildly. He began to yell.

Lonnie hit him a third time. This time Stanley M. Hodges did not get up.

Narla came running into Lonnie's arms. "Darling, are you all right?"

The next day on Earth—on the real Earth or at least the Earth whose most famous quiz show was the Million Dollar Dilemma, not Bet Your Death, not Deeds Not Words—Lonnie presented his camera to Mr. Morgan Maye.

Narla was with him. Narla waited breathlessly with him on the stage, alongside the unused Question Crypt. Narla, hours before, had returned to her own quiz show triumphantly with the Roc trophies. Stanley M. Hodges had been left on the Arabian desert with the corpse of the second Roc. Now Narla had come to Earth—to Lonnie's Earth—for good.

"I forgot to tell you something," Narla said.

"Not now," Lonnie told her. "Can't you see they're about to look at the films and give me one million dollars?"

"But it's important. I forgot to tell you—"

"Not now!" Lonnie said, almost shouting.

"What did you say?" Mr. Maye asked him.

"Nothing," Lonnie said, then whispered to Narla: "What I can't understand is about the time. If we were gone a whole day, how did I make it back here in an hour?"

"That's nothing. The time is nothing. You can cross back and gain or lose a few hours, as you wish. We went back to yesterday, is all. But I forgot to tell you—"

"Never mind about that," Lonnie said peevishly. "Tell me later."

"But I ought to tell you now."

"Later!" Lonnie cried.

"What did you say?" demanded Mr. Maye.

"Nothing," said Lonnie.

"Folks," Mr. Maye intoned, "in a matter of seconds the studio technicians will return to our stage with Lonnie Haney's developed film. As you all know, if the films have on them a picture of the

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fabled Roc, bird of antiquity, Lonnie Haney will receive, this very night, a tax-free check for one million dollars. If the films do not, Lonnie wins nothing." Then Mr. Maye's face brightened. "Except a monthly supply, for life, of our sponsor's product." He looked at Lonnie as he spoke. The camera dollied to Lonnie. Lonnie, with his left arm in a sling. Lonnie, bandaged and battered.

"Lonnie tells us," Mr. Maye went on jubilantly, "that he received these wounds while hunting the Roc with his camera. If true—" Mr. Maye rubbed his hands together—"one million dollars will soon go to Lonnie Haney!"

The audience yowled.

Just then the technicians came running up the aisle with Lonnie's films, still dripping wet from the hypo bath. The band played a fanfare.

The films were handed to Mr. Maye. The audience was completely silent now. Mr. Maye looked at the films.

His jaw dropped—almost down to his navel.

He held the negatives up. A camera dollied toward them. Mr. Maye said, grim of voice, "These negatives are—blank."

The band played a dirge.

Mr. Maye tried to smile. Lonnie tried to smile.

"I tried to tell you," Narla said. "You can't take a picture on Earth with film from this world. Or vice versa. It just won't work."

"This is Earth," Lonnie said mournfully.

"The film remains blank, you see. I tried to tell you."

Mr. Maye was speaking now, but Lonnie didn't hear the words. Sad words, consoling words, words meant to take the sting out of the loss of a million dollars.

Nothing could do that.

Nothing—except Narla and her love, for the rest of their lives.

"And so I present you with this coupon, Lonnie Haney," Mr. Maye said, "this coupon good for a supply, each month for the rest of your life, of our sponsor's product. Good luck to you, Lonnie Haney!"

There was a small smattering of applause as Lonnie left the stage with Narla, invisible to everyone but himself.

"At least we have each other," Lonnie said.

"It won't be so bad, Lonnie darling."

"Bad? After I get used to not having a million bucks, it will be wonderful. From now on, though, make yourself visible, honey, so everyone can see you. Can't have an invisible wife." **THE END**

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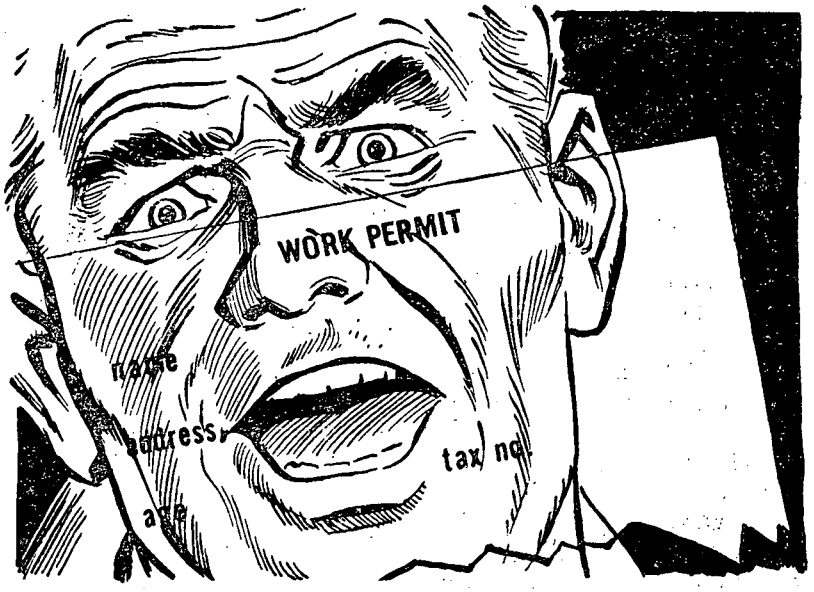
ROUND TRIP

By KARL STANLEY

Burke wasn't looking for trouble. All he wanted was a square deal. But cutting through the government-red tape of the future will make today's governmental routines look like the shortest distance between here and there.



IT WAS a small office, mostly board and glass, but soundproofed, so that once you were in you muffled the tone of your voice. There were two men quietly at work studying the masses of blueprints on their desks, a third man was at the keyboard of an old-fashioned telecommunicator, and a fourth man was shouting into a telephone.

He was short and fat, with a red sweaty face, and he had a cigar stuck in his mouth. Somehow he managed to make himself understood.

". . . Ah! Why don't you save that crap for Connery or somebody! What you mean

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give you time? You know my contract. I got ten gangs of ironworkers waiting for the material . . ." He listened while he mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "What do you mean, tomorrow?" he bellowed. "Those gangs are costing me three thousand dollars a day. And where do you think you are, Frisco? Truck 'copter can get those rods and beams up here from Yonkers in twenty minutes." He lowered his voice. "I want the stuff here today, Joe. You know where you can put it otherwise, and I hope it rusts there!" He slammed the phone on its cradle. "What do *you* want?" he snapped at Burke.

"A job," Burke said.

"Yeah? What do you do?"

"I've been an ironworker."

"At thirty bucks a day everybody wants to be an ironworker. Give me your hand."

He was a little fat man, but his hands were rough and muscular. Burke answered pressure with pressure. The fat man relaxed his grip.

"Okay," he said, "so you've been an ironworker. It's a six-hour day, no drinking, no laying off work. Give Kaminsky there at the tele machine your work-card number and he'll tell you what gang . . ."

"Work-card number? . . ." Burke said.

"Sure, stupid! How you gonna go to work without it?"

"But I don't have one," Burke said quietly.

The fat man took the cigar out of his mouth and studied the charred end. He didn't look at Burke. "Yeah," he said. "You looked kinda like some guys I seen. No color in the face, eyes cold and watching, soft-talking guys, always making sure they never step on anybody's toes. Only difference, you're hard, muscles, guts; the others had it taken outa them. But if a man wants to work I'll hire him. Get a card and you got a job."

"Thanks," Burke said. He turned to go.

"By the way," said the fat man. "What were you in for?"

"Murder," said Burke, and continued to the door.

To the clerk behind the partition under the large painted U, Burke was just another form to be filled out, another number to be filed and told when to report again. Burke quickly wearied of the oral questions.

"Mister," he said, "I have a job to report to. All I need is a work-card."

"But I thought you had one."

"I don't have one."

"Well, then, why did you come to me? . . . h'mm," he

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murmured softly. "I understand. First time Earthside in a long time, eh?"

"Twelve years."

"Where?"

"Aphros Beta penal station."

"I see. Do you have your pardon with you?"

Burke dug his wallet from the inside coverall pocket, pulled the document from it and handed it to the clerk. The clerk scanned it quickly, returned it.

"Full rights and privileges, eh? You must feel pretty good being free?"

"I do," Burke somehow managed to keep his voice level. "Now about the work-card . . ."

"Oh! We can't give *you* a work-card. Regulation 23-AB-1900 takes care of that."

"I don't know the regulation. I can go to work in an hour with a card. How come I can't get one?"

"But of *course* you can get one! It's just that I don't have authority to issue it."

"Damn it!" Burke exploded. "Some day I'll meet a Systems Servant who'll have some authority of his own. Talk and regulations! You can talk all day and never say a damn word! Try to pin you down to something and down comes the 'Regulation' curtain. Who the hell do I see in this place who could tell me how to get a work-card?"

The clerk's thin face paled. He blinked several times, wet his lips, then said, almost primly: "You'll gain nothing by losing your temper. I certainly can't do anything about the regulation governing your case. All I can do is refer you to the authority who can. Guard . . ."

"Sorry, sir," Burke said. He stiffened involuntarily as the thick-set guard in the too-tight uniform stepped to his side.

"Will you escort this man to Mr. Garth's office?" the clerk said.

Garth was a plump man with a rubbery face, a hearty voice, and a don't-be-frightened-by-my-job-manner. But his eyes were pale and lacklustre and his lips had a habit of suddenly thinning as if in derision. He waved the guard out of the office, gestured with an open hand toward the chair in front of the desk, clasped his hands and rested them before him on the desk top.

"Now then," he said, "how can we help you?"

"I had the offer of a job a short while ago, but I don't have a work-card," Burke said. "I found out you have to

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apply to the local employment office so I came down here. The clerk at the, uh, U window interviewed me, and well, seems like you're the man I have to see."

"U window, eh? Well, we'll clear this up now. Simmons should have the interview tape. Excuse me, please . . ." Garth flicked a switch under the desk and said, "Get me Simmons in Section B, please." He smiled at Burke, but his eyes were fish-like in their stare.

Presently a voice broke the silence of the office: "Simmons here, sir."

"Ah, yes, Simmons. The Interview of Mr. . . ." He looked at Burke. Burke whispered his name. ". . . Of Mr. Burke."

The tape recording came on almost immediately. When Burke's voice rose in temper, Garth shook his head and made sucking sounds at the man opposite. At the end of the recording Garth said, "Thank you, Simmons," and flicked the switch under the desk. The rubbery skin widened in a smile. "Now we have it all. May I see your pardon, Burke?"

Burke handed it over.

Garth gave it an almost word-for-word reading. He looked up. "No question about it, you're under Regulation 23-AB-1900. However, I *am* of the opinion we can issue a work-card, after the statutory period of examinations and adjustments are made. Oh, let's say, ten weeks."

"But I can go to work today," Burke pleaded.

"Of course you can! There is no question but that this seventh decade of the twenty-first century will go into history as the most prosperous for all concerned. Do you know we simply don't have enough workers for the jobs available?"

"Mr. Garth. Would you tell me, please, what 23-AB-1900 is?"

"That section of the work code dealing with degenerates, outcasts, murderers, and so forth."

Burke licked his lips. He looked down at his hands. They were tense, hooked. He brought them together, as if in prayer. "Mr. Garth," he said. "The Warden . . . the Warden said it was a full pardon. You know, the right to life, liberty and happiness. Well, a man's got to work . . . I mean I was told I paid my debt to society. The prison doctors gave me the works. Excuse me, sir. They gave me all the examinations they thought . . ."

"Precisely!" Garth broke

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in. "The examinations they thought . . . Hah! It's a well-established fact that prison doctors are the most overworked and under-paid Systems Servants. With Satellite prisons overcrowded as they are, it's quite understandable the doctors want to rid themselves of some of their responsibilities. Let Earthside take care of their problems. Well, Mr. Burke, we are quite able to do so here. Quite! No! We can't let you have a work-card just like that. No matter if you *do* have a job waiting. We must first find out how adjusted you are, whether you can return to the fold, shall we say, whether that *temper* . . ."

"What if they find I can't . . . adjust?"

Garth gave him a long blank stare. The face was no longer smiling. "You will come under State Supervision, then."

"Who else can I see about getting a work-card?"

Garth smiled a sad smile. "I am the only one," he said. "The *only* one."

Burke looked down at his hands, now balled into fists. His voice was choked, pleading: "Can't you see I don't want any more supervision? I had twelve years of it up there in space. I learned to toe a line, say 'sir' with the best of 'em. They taught me well."

"I think we're more capable of judgment on that score than you, Burke," Garth said sharply. "Twelve years ago the World was in a mess. We've reorganized, thrown out some of the nonsensical things, programmed for the future. This is the age of plenty. There's work for all, even men like you. But *we'll* tell *you* what kind of work you'll do."

"So that's what the pardon meant," Burke said. "The big, fat deal. I can go to work, except some big, fat slug like you is gonna tell me what kind of work. Well damn you! . . ."

Garth flicked the switch, and he managed "Hel—" before the thin metal letter opener Burke grabbed closed forever any other sound.

Burke managed to get halfway across the room before the guard's gun dropped him.

"An ex-con," the Captain of guards said. "They never learn. Up for the big strike, too. We won't have to worry about this one any more."

"Murder, hunh," said the one at the dead man's side. "What'd he do?"

"Somebody offered him a job during the depression, twelve years ago, and some dope in State Employment wouldn't give him a work-card."

THE END

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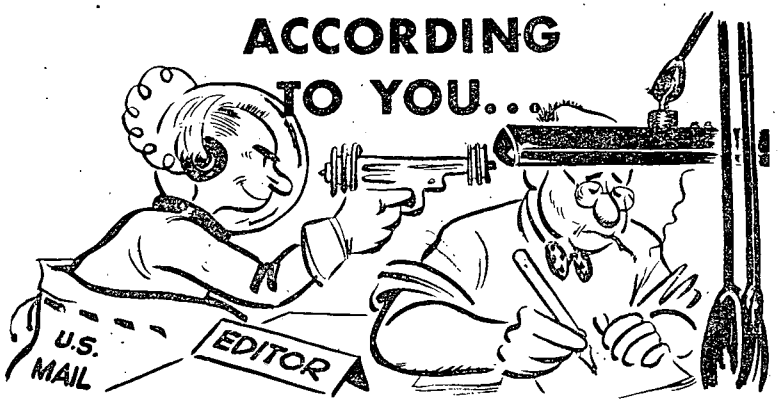

BY THE READERS

Dear Mr. Browne:

In the February issue of your magazine FANTASTIC Science-Fiction I noticed the advertisement for the 30th Anniversary issue of AMAZING STORIES. I would appreciate knowing whether I could purchase this book directly from your offices. If I could do this I would like to know the price, where the money should be sent and when I would receive my copy of this issue.

Daniel Ashley
15531 N. E. 15 Ave.
North Miami Beach
Florida

• *We were hoping somebody would ask those questions, Mr. Ashley, and now you've gone and done it. The 30th Anniversary issue of* Amazing Stories *will be on the stands March 10th. It will be a 260-page book of never-before-reprinted classics from the oldest science-fiction magazines in the business. The old-time readers will find names not seen in many a year and the new generation of science-fiction readers will discover why certain stories stand the test of time and earn the label "classic." So we strongly recommend that you reserve a copy at your local newsstand.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

Here I am, peacefully reading ACCORDING TO YOU in

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your August issue, when I come upon the outrageous notion that science-fiction is "insidious," and that it sneaks into mags to poison their stories. I became so angry that I decided to do something I've never done before, that is, to write a mad letter to the Editor.

Now, while I have the utmost respect for John Riley Brant's opinion, I disagree with him when he says that s-f is spoiling your mag.

TO: J. R. Brant.

What's wrong with s-f? or is it that you simply don't like it, Johnny-boy? And, just to tell me, one of those poor misled people, why do you think that space travel is "hogwash"? I, too, enjoy pure fantasy, am a reader of John Collier, etc., and am proud of it, just as I'm proud of reading good s-f.

Do you think that peaceful use of atomic power is impossible? Do you think that it is impossible for live men (and/or women) to leave the Earth?

TO: Editor.

I am no professional critic, so I cannot evaluate stories according to their literary value. Nevertheless, I am happy to say that I liked and enjoyed all of the stories in this issue, something which is, to say the least, unusual.

Now I think I'd better bring this long-winded thing to a close with a challenge to Mr. Brant to write me and we'll discuss this little "insidious science-fiction" bit.

Ann Chapman
7728 Kraft Ave.
No. Hollywood, Calif.

• *The nicest people in the world—those who lay thirty-five cents on the line for each issue of FANTASTIC—heartily agree with you, Miss Chapman (or Mrs.?) because since the magazine began leaning toward science-fiction and away from straight fantasy, circulation has gone UP!*—ED.

Mr. Browne:

Unfortunately, my typewriter, unlike the Linotype, is not outfitted to give an even 60 em line, but I hope you will still see fit to read this letter. It will double space—uh, the typewriter that is.)

For the first time in many years, about eighteen to be pre-

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cise, I've got the urge to write a letter to the Editor, with all the onions I think are due. All because of the rebuttal to the complaint about your nifty little quote a la Ray Bradbury. Here goes!

That Bradbury is a popular SF writer, none can deny. One can even go so far as to say he is "gifted," a statement of broad and infinite meaning. Why, and how, though can you make a blanket statement such as not "one of them is as gifted as Bradbury"?

As a personal opinion it may be qualified, but as the statement of an expert, supposedly, on the subject of science-fiction authors as a lot, well, if anything it comes close to explaining the weakness of the magazine you edit *presently*.

When, by inference and by statement, you say that men like Asimov, Sturgeon, Heinlein, and Gold, do not invoke the intellect, and lack the qualities of "inner" material, and are in effect only story mechanics, you are making the "boo-boo" of the day.

The only thing I was satisfied with in the article, was the insight it gave me into the reason for the generally poor quality of Fantastic. You have a few good stories, and just scads of plain everyday milled stuff. But writers do have to start somewhere. Oh well, even you are probably thoroughly chastened by now.

The artwork is about the best in the so-called top five, with one or two small exceptions. Stuff like Beecham (?) is fit for the "Cosmos Super-Science" type ragged edge pulps,—ugh! But, oh those sexy cover, seventeen year olds with size thirty eight's, (age per story "Gal in Tube Fourteen"), oh well, no wonder the tin terror went berserk.

I won't threaten to discontinue reading Fantastic, I can't, but someday—.

Hal Leary
T/Sgt.
23rd Strat Recon Sqn (H)
Travis AF Base, Calif.

• *When a critical or qualifying statement is made by any person, be he an editor or a tombstone designer, the statement is of necessity based upon his opinion. Opinions on all subjects vary, so it is the right of anyone to disagree. Our statement*

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relative to Bradbury certainly falls into that category. Many have and will disagree. Also, your statement relative to "scads of plain everyday milled stuff" may get buffetted about a bit, Hal. But that's life.—ED.

Dear Mr. Ed:

I've never written to an editor before but you seem to be a kind and understanding sort. Just finished reading the August issue from cover to cover and I enjoyed it very much; as a matter of fact that is why I'm writing this letter. I wouldn't know what to do with my spare time (I've got any?) if it weren't for *Fantastic* and *Amazing*. Really though, I can always seem to grab the time to read your publications.

I think the story by Dick Purcell "THE GIRL IN TUBE 14" was great; I'd like to see that kind of an hallucination myself. However as many people in the story said and I quote "some people have all the luck." I thought that "THE SMASHERS" & "HE RAN ALL THE WAY" were very good indeed. This ends my comments on this issue.

I would like to get into the act on who is the best S-F writer in the business. Nowhere in Low Man On The Asteroid did see mentioned Richard Shaver and his mysteries; I think you slipped up. While I'm on the subject can you tell what happened to Shaver? I would like to get a collection of his work.

I tried to keep this letter within the bounds you prescribed, almost made it too.

William O. Shell
309 Lynn Ave.
Ames, Iowa

• *The last we heard, Mr. Shaver was living in Wisconsin. A letter addressed to him care of Ray Palmer at Amherst, Wisconsin would probably reach him.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

I am writing today to let you know that your magazine Fantastic is reaching far away places. I have just finished reading your June issue which was sent to a friend of mine, who after reading it, handed the book to me.

The stories certainly live up to the title, but never-the-less make good reading. The published letters from your readers

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are also very interesting and it is good to read their criticisms as well as their compliments.

As a printer by trade I thought the production of your magazine o.k. and the colour and design of your cover all right too. I decided to write with my comments, also to wish you and your readers well from "down under."

You will be hearing more of this part of the globe next year when the Olympic Games are staged in Melbourne (100 miles from Traralgon).

If any of your readers would care to write personally I will be very pleased to hear from them.

Rex D. Blake
6 Alamein Court
Traralgon
Victoria, Australia

• *Nice to hear from you, Mr. Blake. And it would be interesting to hear how many of our readers drop you a line. Of course you'll be flooded with mail.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

I wonder if John Pollard's story, "The Monarch of Mars," about a long dead planet whose ruler still lives, was inspired by a poem of mine bearing the same title which appeared in the October, 1930, issue of *The Planet,* as follows:

The Monarch of Mars

He sits alone, on a crimson throne,
The last of a dying race;
And his ruby crown seems to weigh him down,
As he stares into empty space.
He thinks once more of the years before,
When he ruled o'er a planet proud;
And he hears again the acclaim of men
Who are now but dust in the shroud.
He, too, must pass on, where the rest have gone,
To that sphere from which none come back;
And a lifeless globe, in a blood-red robe,
Shall careen on its destined track.

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While the similarity of title and theme may be purely coincidental, it is gratifying to think that perhaps my poem of 25 years ago inspired Mr. Pollard's fine story in FANTASTIC.

Allen Glasser
241 Dahill Road
Brooklyn 18, N. Y.

• *We queried John Pollard. After reading your poem, he opined as how he'd have been right proud—he was in the middle of a western at the time—to have drawn his inspiration for his* Monarch of Mars *from your* Monarch of Mars. *But he'd never before had the pleasure of reading your fine lines. However, as he left the office there was a speculative light in his eye so maybe before long we'll be publishing* The Son of the Monarch of Mars.—ED.

Mr. Browne:

Popularization of science-fiction and fantasy in recent years has almost ruined me. My responsibilities, as yours, make it necessary for me to earn some sort of "living wage" and as a result I am very far behind in my reading.

My subscriptions are pared to the absolute minimum (include Fantastic) and yet I have at least thirty copies of my favorite magazines stored away unread.

The point being that I stayed up until two A.M. the night following the receipt of the August Fantastic at the real enjoyment of reading. (To the possible detriment of my job.)

Even enjoyed the squib by Purcell.

This letter won't be of much assistance in particular, but in general you know that one more likes Fantastic.

Henry E. Tyler
Box 2081
Fairbanks, Alaska

• *We consider Fantastic very important but the job certainly comes first, Mr. Tyler. But what about the nights you have up there? We've heard they last six months. You don't work night and day, do you? All kidding aside, we like very much to get letters from far-away places. They often come in praising (or knocking) stories from issues three and four years old. Fantastic finds its way even to the South Sea islands.*—ED.

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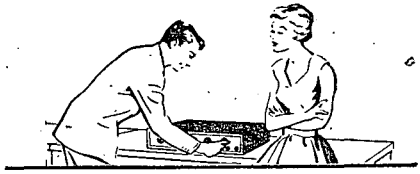
HI-FI . . .



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LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID (Concluded from page 4)

into the '40's—and then with regret but with the feeling that a great story becomes a classic only after the passage of years. So we didn't want to get too current in our selections.

After the very pleasant reading chore, our problems really began. There are other folks in publishing in addition to editors; like for instance the production manager who buys paper and talks to printers: and the circulation chief who delivers the finished books to the distributor (sometimes on his own aching back to hear him tell it).

Anyhow, the production manager eyed us warily and asked, "How big a book did you have in mind?"

"Around 750 pages," we replied from our dream-perch way up in the blue.

After they scraped the production manager off the ceiling and reassembled him, he gave us 260 pages and then left for a week's vacation in the hospital. The circulation chief thought 260 pages wouldn't be too heavy to deliver (he just recently hired a strong boy) so we were in business.

Now came the agonizing part. We could get about 20 yarns into a book that size. We'd read dozens and dozens and more dozens. Which ones would get the nod? We made our selections after much pain and travail with full knowledge that they will be criticized and defended (?) around many a hot stove in time to come.

But our 30th Anniversary Issue is not just a collection of *Amazing* classics. It's plumb full of other surprises. Like for instance, Sid Caesar, Steve Allen, Herb Score, the great young pitcher; Leo Cherne, the fabulous economist; Lilly Daché, John Cameron Swayze, and General Carlos Romulo among others. They predict in this issue, the kind of world they think we will have in the year 2001. So save your copy because a lot of you will still be alive then—it's only 45 years away—so we can drop these folks a note and say, "You wuz wrong, chum," or vice-versa.

Also, there will be the winning letter from the contest *Amazing* ran. Five $100 prizes to the winners.

So that's it. And while we know the [illegible]ition: *Reserve your copy now at your local newsstand* is sort of a cliche, we consider it heads-up advice in the case of our 30th Anniversary Issue. It will be a sellout.

—PWF

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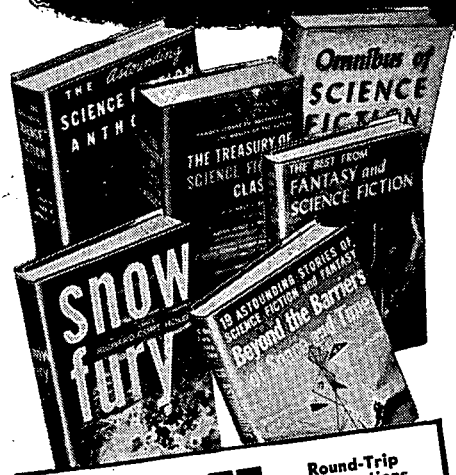
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